

Restoration of Faith

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SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity Naruto OOC PG13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapters 35: Ending of this chapter in my life. STORY NOW COMPLETE!

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Restoration of Faith

[Introduction](#)

[Itachi](#)

[Tsunade](#)

[Legendary Sannin](#)

[Pursuit I](#)

[Pursuit II](#)

[Pursuit III](#)

[Pursuit IV](#)

[Pursuit V](#)

[Pursuit VI](#)

[Healing](#)

[War I](#)

[War II](#)

[War III](#)

[War IV](#)

[War V](#)

[Restore, Restart and Retribution](#)

[Friends?](#)

[Collapse of the Hyuuga Clan](#)

[Resolution I](#)

[Resolution II](#)

[Invitations](#)

[Chuunin Exam 1st Phase I](#)

[Chuunin Exam 1st Phase II](#)

[Chuunin Exam 1st Phase III](#)

[Chuunin Exam 1st Phase IV](#)

[Chuunin Exam 1st Phase V](#)

[Chunnin Exam 1st Stage](#)

[Exam 2nd Stage Day 1 Fight 1](#)

[Exam 2nd Stage Day 1 Fight 2](#)

[Exam 2nd Stage Day 2 Duel Fights 1](#)

[Exam 2nd Stage Day 2 Duel Fights 2](#)

[Exam 2nd Stage Day 3 Team Challenge](#)

[Individual Direction](#)

[Incidents](#)

[Ending of this chapter in my life NEW](#)

Itachi

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter One: Dark Remembrance

I'm sorry everyone but since one of my other fiction stories had been removed because of some STUPID RULE or what not, from now on, I will not be answering the review questions here within the chapter. I really am sorry for not being allowed to thank you all for your support. But please don't stop reviewing, because even if I don't reply back, I do read every single review that comes to me and I keep them all in my heart.

P.S. This chapter has been updated - I have changed the Yondaime's name to "Namikaze Minato".

" **Demon's talk**" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

"---" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Chapter 1

In a dark underground chamber, a single gasping breath rang through out the silence. Suddenly, bright light shone into the room from a door that has been slid open and revealed the person behind it.

Kabuto looked into the dingy dark room, gaze shifting from the dead corpse on the floor to the heaving man sitting up right on the bed. He sighed. "Orochimaru-sama. I really wish you wouldn't do that. It's becoming harder and harder to find people willing to look after you."

Closing the door behind him quietly, Kabuto took several steps into the room and lit a small candle by the bedside. There, he stood, and continued on with his news. "Approximate damage to Konoha residency is minimal – it seems they were far more prepared than we had initially thought. Only 7 deaths, all of them Shinobis – including the Hokage himself, no civilian casualties, but we've at least inflicted close to 40 percent damage to their properties. Yesterday, the Sand have discovered Kazekage's corpse. You'll bet they'll be sending Shinobis after us as soon as they can, that is, IF they can get their country back and running under order." Kabuto smirked. "It was good that we have a contingency plan to begin with. Placing spies among the Sand and having them create disorder and chaos among the streets. Ingenious indeed, Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto complemented.

"SHUT UP!" Orochimaru snarled, sweat soaked and dirty, and covered in his own blood. "What other new development on Konoha do you have for me? I tire of your pathetic compliments." He threatened.

Nodding in understanding, Kabuto started explaining again. "Hyuuga Hiashi has been elected temporary leader for the Leaf. It seems the Emergency Council has decided that the long lost legendary medic Nin – Tsunade-sama would become the next Hokage. At the same time, Jiraiya-sama and Naruto-kun have been sent to FIND her. They left this morning." Kabuto concluded.

A deadly yet insane smile appeared on Orochimaru's face as he heard the names of his former comrades – Tsunade and Jiraiya, as well as that pesky Kuunoki brat – Naruto. "Let's pay Tsunade-hime a visit before them... shall we?" He hissed in excitement.

"Yes. Lets." Kabuto agreed.

A short silence ensued between the two men, which were suddenly broken by Orochimaru's curious question. "Kabuto. Is this information reliable? How did you know that Jiraiya and Naruto left this morning?"

Shrugging in nonchalance, Kabuto answered. "I still have a spy inside Konoha. One that I've never given an active role and therefore remained safe, even after the confrontation - one that they will never suspect."

"Who?" Orochimaru demanded to know.

"His name is Mizuki. He's a part time teacher inside the Ninja Academy and part time administrator within the Hokage Tower." Kabuto answered smugly.

Itachi stared impassively at Hatake Kakashi and his futile attempt at besting him in a battle. "We've come looking for something..." He tautly replied.

"Looking for something?" Though exhausted from the short but intense battle, Kakashi's eyes narrowed in suspicion at his opponent's words. In his mind, he whirled through the possibilities of anything inside Konoha that would be of value to Itachi and the Akatsuki and finally stumbled upon two possibilities. "You're looking for Sasuke... aren't you?" He asked, tensing his body with the anticipation of going full out against the famous Uchiha prodigy even though he was already slightly battered and bruised. He could feel his two comrades behind him (Asuma and Kurenai) also tensing in anticipation for the battle to come.

After a short pause, Itachi decided to enlighten them in regards to his purpose for returning to Konoha. "No." He stated succinctly. "We are after the fourth Hokage's legacy." He murmured softly and yet conspiringly.

Shocked into silence, both Asuma and Kurenai knotted their closed eyes together, slightly confused as to what Itachi is talking about and wondering if Kakashi had been able to decipher the cryptic clue. Finally, Kakashi spoke out, with a very menacing tone of voice, as if daring Itachi to lay a hand on whatever object or subject he had returned to look for. "What do you want with him?" He asked dangerously.

Kakashi had remembered the conversation he had had with Jiraiya not that many days ago, when the old man had informed him that Naruto was currently being hunted down by a very powerful organisation known as the Akatsuki. For the past 6 years that Jiraiya had lived outside of the Leaf village, he had not only travelled from place to place with Naruto, he had also acted as a spy for the Leaf – following the footsteps of his prior comrade turned traitor – Orochimaru.

It was during that time that he had discovered the existence of the Akatsuki – a powerful organisation made up of only S-class missing Nins, including 2 of Konoha's most deadly ninjas – Orochimaru and Uchiha Itachi. That was why he had Naruto in the first place to scout out more information about the formation of this organisation – only to return to find Naruto had gone through a traumatic event, which had almost cost him his soul. (1) That was why since that day forth, whenever Jiraiya had to leave for a mission or any other reason other, leaving Naruto behind, he had always left behind a clone of his just to make sure the boy doesn't get into trouble. He had also realised early on that Naruto could be a potential target for Akatsuki and such, had immediately moved the boy to the safest location in the world – the Kuunokigakure no sato (Hidden Air village).

"Is your target... the *Kyuubi* inside of Naruto? Or is it... *Naruto* himself?" Kakashi asked through his gritted teeth and panting breath. He could see that both Itachi and Hoshigaki Kisame were surprised that he knew who their target was. "What does the Akatsuki want with him?" Kakashi threatened, though due to his almost exhausted state, it didn't look very threatening.

Just as Kisame launched himself towards Kakashi and his two Leaf Shinobis, intending to slice and dice them to pieces, he was knocked away by the famous 'Green Beast of the Leaf' – Maito Gai himself.

Irritated at being bested by such a freak, Kisame was about to charge towards the Konoha Nins again when Itachi ordered him to stop. "Enough, Kisame. We did not come here to start a war. If we continue, it would simply be a waste of our time."

Kisame gritted his teeth in a sneer against the Leaf Nins. "I still want my revenge." He spoke dangerously as a small glint of insanity appeared in his shark-like eyes.

"It is of no consequence, or have you forgotten why we are here in the first place. Our target is no longer in the Leaf, and as such, there is no point for us staying in the Leaf. Let's go." And with that said and done, both Akatsuki members disappeared into clouds of smoke.

"Shouldn't we pursue them?" Kurenai asked quietly, unsure of whether they should be doing their duty by hunting down these missing Nins or should they take care of Kakashi first.

Gai narrowed his eyes in concentration. "I will pursue them. Kurenai – you take Kakashi to the hospital immediately. Asuma – inform the councillors of this incident. Let's just hope that Jiraiya-sama and Naruto-kun are strong enough to hold them off, because I really don't think there is anyone one here that can best them." Once he had finished his orders, Gai also disappeared into a cloud of smoke, leaving Kurenai and Asuma to do as they were told.

Sasuke huffed breathlessly as he bent forward in exhaustion, clasping his hands on his knees to keep him up, retaining enough energy to stop himself from tipping over onto the ground. Still panting, he glared at the two massive holes upon the massive rock surface directly in front of him. Deep in his heart, a maelstrom of emotions swirled within him, all concerning the single entity of Uzumaki Naruto – his one true rival and comrade in arms.

(FLASHBACK)

" *You're only gonna be a burden to me!!!*"

(END FLASHBACK)

Sasuke gritted his teeth firmly, enough to feel them gnaw against one another, fuelling his anger, frustration and jealousy over his team mate's power and authority. / *I'M NOT WEAK!!!!*/ He swore to himself. / *I'LL PROVE TO HIM THAT I'M NOT WEAK!!!!*/ Sasuke promised as he gathered chakra once again, performing a list of seals as fast as he possibly could and released a giant fireball at the poor rock formation that he had chosen to become his new training opponent.

Suddenly realising he had very little chakra left within his body, Sasuke automatically slumped forward into a kneeling position on the ground, needing his arms to support his upper body from slamming onto the hard ground directly in front of him. / *WHAT HAVE I BEEN DOING ALL THIS TIME?!*/ He asked himself desperately. / *WHILE NARUTO CONTINUES TO GROW STRONGER AND STRONGER EACH TIME I SEE HIM, WHAT THE HELL HAVE I BEEN DOING ALL THIS TIME???!!!* /

Sasuke had realised that with every difficult battle that their team had met up against, it was always Naruto who eventually bailed them out of trouble. First was against Haku and Zabuza, then Orochimaru, and finally Gaara. / *How many more times do I need **HIM** to rescue me before I **STOP** being so weak!!*/ He growled to himself mentally, berating himself for all his weakness and needing a fellow Genin to save his life. / ***HOW AM I SUPPOSE TO KILL ITACHI IF I CAN'T EVEN SAVE MYSELF?!*** /

Emotionally and physically exhausted, Sasuke allowed his body to slump forward, landing awkwardly onto the dusty ground below him. Ignoring the dirt upon his body as well as the pain of moving, Sasuke turned his body around so that he was facing the sky instead of the

ground. There he stared at the unending blue above him and wondered.

/Every single time, Naruto had to bail ME out of trouble... ME?! Uchiha Sasuke! The Genius of the Uchiha Clan! Needing someone else to rescue ME?! What's wrong with me.../ Shaking his head from continuing to berate himself, Sasuke concentrating on what he knew of Naruto's fighting style and weaknesses. / Every time I thought I had figured that guy out, he pops up with something completely new and unique that I have never seen before. He has that powerful Tenkun no buki at his side that he refuses to use in my presence ever since the Zabuza incident, he rarely teaches Sakura or me any other Jutsus now that we've mastered the original ones he gave to us. He treats us more like known strangers than as friends or even allies. Even Sakura hadn't seen him since he left the Chuunin Tower after the Preliminaries. He's got too much mystery behind him and he refuses to share any of them with us. What kind of comrade is that?! That was when Sasuke finally came to a realisation... I don't know him at all, do I? ... I don't know anything about Uzumaki Naruto... His strengths, his weaknesses, his likes, his dislikes... I haven't learnt a single thing about him in all the time I've known him... why?/

Sighing in frustration, Sasuke pushed aside his anger and jealousy towards his teammate, knowing that it was simply a side effect of having a teammate that was stronger than him. He had once believed that if he trained hard enough, learnt more unique and powerful jutsus, then maybe he would have a chance of equalling Naruto's power. But it seems that he was wrong. If Naruto continued to evolve with each battle that he encounters, then how was Sasuke ever going to catch up to him? And if Sasuke couldn't even catch up to his blond teammate, what right did he have to pursue Itachi for revenge? These were questions that Sasuke couldn't answer, or simply wouldn't answer, for he knew that the answer would not satisfy him.

He had lived every single day of his life since that day forth to pursue his ambition of killing his brother. It was for that sole purpose that he had survived until this day. But he just couldn't understand how Naruto could have bested him in all areas of being a Ninja. For as long as Uchiha Sasuke had known Uzumaki Naruto, Naruto had always been a mystery to both him and Sakura. He rarely talks about himself, if at all, and when he does, the information was usually vague and of no importance at all. He had learnt more about Naruto from Kabuto's Nin Info cards than all the months he had spent in the blonde's companionship. This was a really distressing realisation.

/What HAVE I been doing all this time?/ He asked himself again as he pondered the massive difference in skill between himself and Naruto. There and then, Uchiha Sasuke came to a decision. */ I will become stronger. NO matter what the cost. No matter what the price. I will find a way to become stronger than Naruto. And then, I'll go after Itachi and kill him. Once that's done and over with... I find a way to revive my clan./* It was a simple, almost childish dream, but the only dream that had kept Sasuke going in his dark days of depression and loneliness. It was the only he had left to push him forward and he will seize it with all his strength, never to let go until he had achieved what he had set out to do.

Releasing a large sigh, Sasuke struggled to his feet. Once up right, he decided that it was a good time to go home, maybe have lunch, take a shower and go straight to bed. He had, after all, spent the last 2 days in this very clearing, punching his frustrations out on the poor rock while he furiously thought over the difference in strength between himself and Naruto. Having taken a short break for the third Hokage's funeral service wasn't enough to calm his emotions, he had returned straight after the service to continue his self-mutilation practice and inner scolding, all of which didn't help him in this predicament at all.

Stumbling blindly towards where his subconscious mind thought home was, Sasuke was abruptly brought out of his musings when a loud explosion sounded off in the distance. He could vaguely

distinguish the sound of splattering water some distance away from his very location. Curious about who was involved and what kind of ninja battle was, Sasuke thought that perhaps he could take advantage of the training or battle that is going on, and collect a few more jutsus to add to his arsenal using his Sharingan. Decision made, Sasuke hurried off to the origin of the fight as fast as his exhausted body could take him.

When Sasuke finally made it to the place where he thought the sound of battle (which had abruptly stopped after the gigantic water explosion from before) originated from, he suddenly found himself frozen into shock. */ That... that man... He couldn't be... He... He.../* His thoughts whirled around frantically all over Sasuke's mind, suspecting and yet completely in denial of what he was currently seeing. Two men, cloaked in black with strange cloud designs, stood nonchalantly in front of four tense Konoha Jounins, one of which was his own teacher, an exhausted looking Kakashi.

But it wasn't the strange circumstance of having two foreign ninjas, supposedly much stronger than Konoha's elite Jounins that had Sasuke surprised and stunned into a statue like state. It was that Sasuke recognised one of those dark cloaked men to be none other than his hateful brother, Uchiha Itachi.

/Itachi!!! ITACHI!!!! That bastard finally showed his face again. He DARED show his face again!!!/ Sasuke could do nothing else except shiver in slight fear as he looked at his brother's cold and emotionless eyes. One part of him raged that his brother dared to return to Konoha as if it were as easy as a stroll in the park and wanted nothing more than the plunge a Chidori right into the man's beating heart; another part of him couldn't bring himself to launch an offensive attack at his brother. It was the same fear that had crippled Sasuke since the day he had watched his clan slaughtered by the man in front of him, the man who still plagued his nightmares day and night.

Suddenly, both Itachi and his companion (a pale skinned man who looked strangely similar to a shark) disappeared into smoke, having made their escape in a very professional manner. Shaking himself out of his stunned oblivion, Sasuke instantly started ranting at himself for the missed opportunity to kill his brother. */ He was RIGHT THERE!! Right there and I couldn't do a thing except stand here and watch!? What kind of Fking am I?! HE WAS RIGHT THERE!!!*

Mentally berating himself, Sasuke willingly released the old rage and insane madness that had almost eaten his soul so many years ago, this time, he would let it run its course. No matter what the cost, he would use anything and everything he had to defeat and kill his brother. The time for snivelling in fear is over! Even if he must rely on the strange, corruptive power Orochimaru had given him, he would, if only to defeat his so called genius brother, avenge his fallen clan and kill the bastard that had stolen everything from him.

Noticing that Gai had suddenly rushed off to the distance, Sasuke didn't even hesitate before he summoned forth all the Chakra from what's left of his very being and rushed off after the green clad man, leaving behind two stunned Jounins (who had just noticed his presence) and one unconscious teacher.

Once Sasuke had disappeared into the trees, running after Gai. Both Kurenai and Asuma looked at his each other in question, both understanding that it was dangerous for the last Uchiha heir to rush off into battle, especially against the dangerous S-Class missing nin, Uchiha Itachi. But then again, they both understood that they had a duty to perform, and it most definitely wasn't babysitting a revenge-obsessed boy. If Kakashi had been well and healthy, perhaps the boy would at least listen to his own sensei, but with Kakashi now unconscious and more of a burden and any help to his comrades, Kurenai and Asuma came to a silent agreement. They will go and do what Gai had ordered them to do in the first place – take Kakashi to the hospital and tell the Councillors of Itachi's sudden appearance and that Sasuke had gone after him.

Though knowing that they were only doing their jobs to the best of their ability, both Kurenai and Asuma couldn't get rid of the dread and deep trepidation that everything was going so very wrong at the moment. They could only hope that Naruto and Jiraiya could fend for themselves against 2 S-class missing nin, and that Gai could somehow keep Sasuke out of harms way. Leaping into the distance, that was all Kurenai and Asuma could hope for.

Naruto glared suspiciously at the busy town's people that surrounded them. "Tell me again, pervert Sennin. WHY ARE WE HERE?!"

Smiling stupidly at the number of women walking along this busy street, filled with people and sounds of stall owners advertising their goods, Jiraiya was literarily drooling in delight. "Oh come on. Naruto. What's the rush? It's not like whether we find Tsunade today or tomorrow is gonna make any difference. Let's have some fun while we're on our way, shall we? After all, it's been a while since we last travelled, eh?" Jiraiya wiped away a drool of saliva as he spoke casually to his eye-twitching student.

Grimacing in disgust, Naruto reminded himself to stay calm and focused. *I Now is not a good time to bash his head in!* / He had almost forgotten what type of travelling companion Jiraiya had been since he had spent such a long time in a stable environment and surrounded by other people's influences.

It's not that Jiraiya doesn't get the job done. On the contrary, the man would probably do it very well. It's just that he isn't very reliable when it comes to TIMING. If given a time limit, he would probably break it by a few weeks at the earliest and a few years at the latest. The white haired old man isn't exactly your typical latecomer, like Kakashi, but he's just sooooo easily distracted by other aspects, namely – the female gender, his peeping hobby and book writing skill, as well as alcohol, though thank god Jiraiya isn't a gambler. If not, both him and Naruto would probably find themselves sleeping and living in the forest most of the time.

Naruto sighed heavily, looking sadly up at the sky as if asking: 'God... Why me?' before pulling himself together to give his old guardian a fierce glare. "We have to find Tsunade-sama to take over the position of Hokage as soon as possible, or have you forgotten that there is a maniac Snake Sannin who wants to destroy Konoha no matter what the cost and that with both you and I out here doing this stupid errand, there's possibly NO ONE inside the Leaf right now who could stand up against him even with his arms sealed as the third had done!?" Naruto yelled all in one breath.

Jiraiya blinked at his student in astonishment. For the first time in a very long time, Naruto was actually passionate about doing something for the Leaf. In fact, Jiraiya couldn't remember a time where Naruto was ever loyal to the Leaf village at all, let alone wanting to do such 'stupid' errands for them. He was surprised at the boy's fiery speech, acting as if he truly cared for the Leaf village. / *Minato... You would be proud... He's growing up so fast now...* / The old senin thought to himself but outwardly, he only shrugged in response to the boy's outcry and continued to ogle at all the pretty ladies walking around, trying to find one that would catch his eyes.

All of a sudden, he spotted a beautiful young woman who had long, silky black hair, wearing a tight crop top that showed off the shape of her chest and exposed the smooth skin on her shoulders. She winked at the old pervert knowingly and instantly he was under her spell.

Naruto's eyebrows twitched dangerously as he continued to glare upon his perverted teacher as the white haired man seemingly floated across towards said girl. / *What's wrong with that women? Can't she see that she's only attracting that stupid old man?! GOD! Why am I stuck with him?! Why couldn't it be someone else?!* / Mentally berating himself and most of all – Jiraiya - for the old man's perverted ways, Naruto suddenly felt a physical twitch of pain from his chest area. Rubbing the skin above his heart, Naruto frowned in confusion, not understanding why his body suddenly reacted like that when he knew that he hadn't sustained any damage. Abruptly, the

pain started up again, this time, it was a sharp spark burning through his chest as if someone had stabbed a hot blade into it – forcing a short gasp out of Naruto's mouth. As suddenly as the pain came, it disappeared just as quick.

Now Naruto was suspicious about that pain, the only time his body would react in such a weird way was when the Yochigan erratically acted up again. And if it was the Yochigan acting up, that means that something bad was going to happen, or is happening as they speak. Frowning again, this time in suspicion and nervousness, Naruto thought over everything that had happened that morning to see if that there was anything going on that could account for his Yochigan acting up but could not find anything.

The only people who had known that Naruto and Jiraiya were leaving that morning had been the people in the special council meeting, all of whom had sworn an oath of secrecy, even Sakura and Shikamaru wouldn't have told anyone he was leaving. In that case, what could possibly be going wrong now?

Not trusting anything up to chance, Naruto quickly made a decision to leave this town as soon as possible, namely now... that is, if he can drag his errant sensei away from the pretty girl's clutches. "Oi! Pervert Sennin!!! We have to go! NOW!" Noticing that Jiraiya hadn't heard a word he said, Naruto stomped over, grabbed the man's octopus hands and started dragging him away from the girl, only to find himself dragging something as heavy as a mountain. / *Note to self, Jiraiya can be INCREDIBLY ANNOYING when he doesn't want to move!!* / Naruto mentally counted.

After trying several minutes, unsuccessfully, to drag Jiraiya more than a metre from the still winking girl, Naruto started to lose his temper. Fuming internally at his stubborn sensei, Naruto glared at the girl, deciding that she was the one to blame for all this. As he continued to glare, he noticed certain subtleties upon her aura that was abnormal to the average person. / *Is that... It is!? Genjutsu!! She's under some Genjutsu!! A powerful one at that!* / Finally noting the rare Genjutsu at play upon the girl's mind, Naruto quickly tried to

deflect the illusion from her. "KAI!" But to no avail, the Genjutsu continued to go on its course. */ Damn! Must be powerful if I couldn't even deflect it./*

Frowning, knowing that he would require help. Naruto dragged Jiraiya's ear all the way down to his own height level before yelling into the man's ear: "WAKE UP!!! YOU PERVERTED SENNIN!!!" Finally catching the man's attention, Naruto continued on using a whispered, urgent voice, ignoring all the strange looks people were starting to give them. "She seems to be under a very strong Genjutsu, I can't deflect it, what about you?"

Jiraiya, finally pulling himself out of his perverted mode, glanced at the girl with a critical eye this time, and finally noticed the strange aura that surrounded her. The change was very slight, and only a very elite ninja would even notice the change, however, even if the Genjutsu was identified, something of this calibre would still be difficult to deflect, as Naruto had demonstrated. Jiraiya however, does have the right ability to deflect such a high ranking Genjutsu, but the question now remains, who had put the Genjutsu on her in the first place and what should they do about it.

As if reading the old man's mind, Naruto quickly supplied a suggestion. He's now starting to assert himself more in decision making situations than before, showing that he truly was growing out of his childish ways of only following whatever his guardian decided upon. "We should make a clone of ourselves and have it continue on its course. Then, we hide our real selves and watch from a safe distance as to what will happen next. At least then, we'll know whom we're dealing with." Jiraiya nodded slightly and they both made quick, almost invisible hand seals, creating identical Kage Bunshins of themselves. But before the Clones were even completed, Naruto had called forth a teleporting jutsu, pulling himself and Jiraiya to a safe distance away, while placing the clones in their stead.

Once everything was ready, both Jiraiya and Naruto crouched in hiding, watching as their clones interested with the oblivious girl and the people around the street, who were still unaware of the switch,

since it was done so perfectly and seamlessly, very few could tell the difference. Even a Sharingan eye wouldn't have been able to tell the difference, especially if they weren't looking at the people who performed it at exactly the right time the jutsus were performed.

An hour later, Naruto and Jiraiya finally found out who they were up against, and they were not very happy about who their opponents turned out to be...

Though Naruto couldn't recognise the two cloaked men cornering his clone to an empty alleyway on the edges of town, but he could still sense the dangerously powerful aura that surrounded both of them, one having a far more menacing power than the other. / *They must be S-Class Missing Nins or something by the looks of their forehead protectors. One's an ex-Leaf Shinobi, while the other is an ex-Mist Shinobi. Damn! I wish I know who I'm up against, but they both feel so powerful... Especially the short one.* / Naruto gulped in tense nervousness. He had never faced up against an S-Class missing Nin before in his life. Jounin, Chuunin, Genin, Anbu and even some Hunter Nin yes, but never an S-Class Missing Nin. Of course, Zabuza's not counted.

Jiraiya on the other, hand recognised both of the Missing Nins, and he was most definitely not happy at who they turned out to be. / *Damn! Why does the Akatsuki have to pick NOW to come after Naruto?! /* He internally cursed.

Without looking over at his pupil, Jiraiya whispered to the boy what exactly he should do next. "Naruto, tell your clone to act scared." He murmured under his breath. Naruto looked back at him curiously but didn't reply verbally, knowing that Jiraiya was completely focused on the situation at hand.

It was true that the Akatsuki had tried before to capture Naruto, but since Naruto and Jiraiya had always been travelling, never stopping long enough to be noticed, the Akatsuki had never come close to finding them before. After all the years of silence, Jiraiya had been

lured into a false sense of security, especially after Naruto had declared himself a Kuunoki Shinobi as well as a Leaf nin.

Not many Ninja villages in the world would dare challenge the power of the Kuunoki, not because they really fear the small village's wrath but because there is an air of uncertainty concerning the Kuunoki Shinobi's actual power. Since the only contact the world had with the Hidden Air village had been through either their diplomats or their Gate Guardians (2), the rest of the world had been led into an assumption that the Kuunoki were truly powerful people. After all, no one really knows much about them at all.

And now, it seems the fact that Naruto is protected by the laws of the Kuunoki no Sato wasn't even a concern to the Akatsuki. Because if Jiraiya was correct in his assumptions, both Uchiha Itachi and Hoshigaki Kisame weren't interested in negotiating the terms and conditions of Naruto's capture with the Lady Oracle at all. Action speaks more than words. Jiraiya grimaced at the fact that he'd have to fight both of them. / *Man! Why couldn't we just slip away?!* / He mentally cried.

"Naruto-kun. We would like you to come with us." Itachi calmly stated, cold, red, Sharingan eyes gazed unflinchingly at the slightly shuddering boy in front of him.

"Who... Who are you? ... Why do you have the Sharingan?" The Naruto clone stuttered as even he could feel the enormity of the man's chakra and power.

Kisame smirked at the cowering boy. "Heh! You sure this is the Kyuubi brat we're looking for, Itachi? He don't seem very special to me." He sneered at the boy.

/ Itachi?! UCHIHA Itachi?! The one Jiraiya told me about. The man that massacred his entire clan, leaving only Sasuke behind?! Oh dear god... / The clone thought to himself as he sent the new

information to his host mentally, noting the following shocked response from his creator. (3)

Blinking in shock, the real Naruto glanced back at Jiraiya's tense and narrowed eyed expression, finally understanding why Jiraiya wanted him to hide his true potential, especially in the face of the infamous Uchiha prodigy. Even during the time he was living back in the Leaf village almost 7 years ago, Naruto had heard of the prodigy of the Uchiha clan. A genius who was able to attain the rank of Chuunin at the mere age of 7, Uchiha Itachi, the now renowned destroyer of his own clan. If Naruto couldn't even defeat Orochimaru using a Tenkun no Buki, there was no way he could possibly win against Itachi, even with help. Returning his gaze back to his clone, he silently ordered the Bunshin to act scared and nervous, anything to draw the two men's attention away from the real him.

"Maybe we should cut off his legs. After all, we don't want the brat to be able to run around all the place." Kisame threatened as he gripped his Samehada (shark skin) sword tighter than necessary.

Not wanting Naruto's clone to be discovered so soon, Jiraiya's clone chose that very moment to appear behind the two men, at the entry of the blocked alleyway. "Oi! What do you two think you're doing?" Jiraiya ordered in a pissed off tone of voice.

Itachi glanced at the white haired man with disinterest in his eyes while Kisame lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "Well. Well. If it isn't the Legendary Sennin himself, Jiraiya eh? We're heard that you liked beautiful women but didn't expect that you'd be stalled this long. So, you did finally manage to break Itachi's Genjutsu spell, didn't you?" He gloated, testing to see if the Sannin would take the bait or not. When Jiraiya took no action against the comment, Kisame shrugged in a nonchalant manner.

Ignoring Kisame's sarcastic comment, Jiraiya looked directly at Itachi. "Why? What is the purpose of kidnapping Naruto? What do

the Akatsuki plan to do with him?" He demanded in a calm and serious tone of voice.

Unblinking, Itachi answered in a vague way. " 'Abduct Naruto.' Those were the words that the higher echelon of our organisation – Akatsuki - gave to us. That is all we know. That is all we care."

Narrowing his eyes in anger, Jiraiya was just about to launch back his own argument when he felt an unknown presence suddenly turning up behind him. / *Shit! Is it another one of the Akatsuki?! /* He thought to himself frantically, but was brought abruptly out of his panic when the bowl hair cut of Maito Gai suddenly appeared out of a cloud of smoke, directly beside him.

"Jiraiya-sama!" yelled the self-proclaimed green beast of Konoha as he landed next to one of his all time idols. Looking up at Kisame and Itachi suddenly, Gai lost his ready smile and tensed his body into an up-right stance, pulling his right hand forward in his favourite battle posture, looking serious. "Uchiha Itachi." He stated calmly. "You! Who have bested my eternal rival, Hatake Kakashi, shall pay for all the crimes you have done in accordance to Konoha law!" He suddenly proclaimed out loud.

Kisame lifted his eyes in disbelief at the stupid looking man while Itachi didn't even bat an eyelash. Jiraiya just grimaced at having to stand next to the odd man while Naruto simply sweat dropped behind his head. However, to all their surprise a new voice had arisen from the sudden quiet atmosphere, the voice of someone they did not want to be anywhere near the vicinity, and one they really wished they hadn't heard.

" **ITACHI!!!!!!!!** " Sasuke yelled as he rushed passed the stunned form of both Maito Gai and Jiraiya, ignoring their shouts for withdrawal. Consumed by his hate for his brother, Sasuke blindly ran towards the man who had made him suffer, the man who had betrayed his greatest trust and shattered his life's dream, the man who had made him an avenger. Charging the Chidori within his left hand with all he's got, Sasuke aimed his electrified hand towards his

brother's ice-cold heart, aiming to stab right through the very man who had plagued his life since the incident occurred.

Standing calm and ignoring his younger brother's outcry, Itachi seamlessly snapped Sasuke's electrified hand mere centimetres before it contacted his very chest. A loud blast of explosion erupted when the Chidori's path of destruction was suddenly halted by Itachi's very action. The Chidori, having no where to turn its effects, exploded, demolishing one entire side wall of the alleyway for several rooms in a row. The sudden silence after the blow was deafening to all the people involved.

Sasuke glared hatefully at Itachi. Itachi gazed piercingly cold at Sasuke. Both were at a small standstill that was not to last. "You're in the way." With a quick snap, Sasuke suddenly found his wrists broken and he screamed in agony. The child's cry seem to suddenly bring both Gai and Jiraiya out of their stunned silence and both immediately launched into action. Seeing both the green clad man and the white haired man rushing at him, Itachi decided to be rid of one of them at the very least. Pulling the broken wrist up, Itachi slammed his left leg directly into Sasuke's chest, crushing some of his ribs and knowing that at least a few of them had punctured the boy's lung in the process. With the sudden impact, Sasuke flew backwards by the powerful force of Itachi's kick, halting only when he smashed against Gai and brought both of them onto the ground in a haphazard landing.

Jiraiya, managing to avoid the flying debris that is Sasuke, continued to run forward towards Itachi while completing a set of hand seals of his own. The Naruto clone too, had been brought out of his quiet contemplation of what to do when Sasuke screamed, launching himself into his own set of hand seals, only to be stopped by Kisame and his strange sword.

Kisame, having noticed Naruto's hand seals, immediately swiped his Samehada (shark skin) painfully across Naruto's face. Smashing the boy's face against the corner wall's hard surface and digging some of the sword's sharp edges into the boy's delicate skin, bringing out

blood while cancelling the boy's jutsu by sucking his chakra dry. "Heh. Don't even think about it, kid. My 'Samehada' absorbs Chakra."

Glaring through his narrowed eyes, the Naruto clone unexpectedly smirked at the shark like man. Noticing the smirk, Kisame frowned, wondering what the hell the boy was so happy about. Suddenly, the Naruto that was stuck between the wall and his sword puffed into non-existence, leaving only a cloud of smoke behind. / *WHAT THE HELL!?* / Kisame was shocked.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu." Answered a still calm Itachi as he now turned his attention to the rapidly approaching Jiraiya, narrowing his eyes slightly at the unexpected turn of events.

"Ninpou: Gama Guchi Shibari!" (Ninjutsu: Toad Mouth Bind) Jiraiya called out as he suddenly stopped his approach and slammed both his palms onto the ground, instantly morphing their immediate surrounding into that of his special jutsu. The walls of the digestive track lining within one of his special summons – Iwagama - followed Jiraiya's silent orders, constricting its muscles in such a way that it closed off all routes of escape for the two Missing Nins, except for the way that was currently being blocked by Jiraiya himself. Loosing much chakra at having to perform this jutsu, the Jiraiya clone yelled out for both Itachi and Kisame to surrender, but naturally, both fugitives ignored the warning.

Taking note that all around them, the stomach walls were growing larger and larger at an exponential rate, Itachi decided a temporary retreat was in order. After all, they haven't been given a definite time limit to accomplish their task and there have been many people before them who had failed on this very same mission. In this sense, a little leeway in the procedure of accomplishing their task was in order.

"Kisame! Come!" Itachi raised his voice slightly, catching his companion's attention as he closed his eyes in focus. / *Mangekyou Sharingan! Amaterasu! (Kaleidoscope Sharingan! Heavenly Light!)/*

(4) Opening his eyes quickly, a flash beam of pure black fire burst from his eyelids and rapidly burnt through the wall of muscle and flesh. (5) Less than a tenth of a second later, Itachi had released his powerful jutsu and launched himself out of the newly created opening, with Kisame not far behind.

The Jiraiya clone gapped openly at how easily Itachi was able to break out of his jutsu, a jutsu that was supposedly impossible to escape. Hearing a grunt of pain from behind him, Jiraiya turned around to look at the frustrated gaze of Gai and the unconscious form of Sasuke draping over the green clad man. Seeing Jiraiya frowning in confusion, Gai decided to explain. "The boy wanted to get back into the fight, but I wouldn't let him. Eventually, I had no choice but to knock him out. I'm sorry for not helping enough, Jiraiya-sama." Gai commented sincerely, already mentally scolding himself for his lack of action.

The Jiraiya clone suddenly turned into a cloud of smoke when Gai finished his explanations, shocking the man even further. / *IT WAS A CLONE!!!???* / He mentally questioned as he heard a soft cough from behind him. Turning around, Gai found himself face to face with two solemn faces belonging to the real Jiraiya and Naruto.

Leaving Naruto to help heal up Sasuke's injuries, Jiraiya took the time to seal whatever special fire Jutsu that Itachi had used to burn a whole through his own special Jutsu. "Fuuin Jutsu: Fuuka Houin! (Sealing Jutsu: Fire Sealing Method)" Jiraiya called out as he focussed his chakra into gathering the remnants of Itachi's black fire and burning its presence into the newly written scroll in front of him. Once the scroll was secured and kept safe, Jiraiya turned to Gai to give him his next orders. "Gai. You and Sasuke should go back and stay in the Leaf."

Looking up at Jiraiya sadly, Gai tried to protest. "But Jiraiya-sama. What if you need help later on? What if Itachi and Kisame came after you guys again?"

Jiraiya stalled the rest of his protest with a shook of his head. "Don't worry about us, Gai. We can take care about ourselves. Just take the boy home and keep him there. Who knows what's gonna happen now that he'd meet his brother again. Damn! This is getting more complicated by the minute." Jiraiya swore, rubbing his face tiredly.

Standing up straight and looking sadly over the beaten and bruised form of Sasuke, Naruto nodded to himself silently before turning around and leaving the immediate premises. "Jiraiya. Let's go." He called out in an unenthusiastic voice.

Lifting an eyebrow at the boy's sudden change of attitude, Jiraiya could do nothing more than follow the boy's footsteps, calling out his goodbye's to Gai as he went along.

Gai picked up Sasuke's prone form quietly and steadied the boy onto his back. Just before he was about to leave the vicinity, he heard Naruto call back to him with a final message.

"Oi! Gai-san! Tell the Councillors that we'll be back in 5 days MAX!" Naruto promised, lifting up a thumb's up sign from his right hand and standing in a good guy pose. It was a promise he wasn't about to break. With the tension back to normal standards, both groups started on their own way again, one heading home back to Konoha while the other set off, more determined than before, to finish their quest as fast as possible.

/ No matter the cost, I keep my promises. /

(1) Jiraiya left Naruto when he was 9 years old – during the time when Naruto met Elle.. and well, you know how that ended up.

(2) 'Gate Guardians' of the Kuunoki are similar to the 'Hunter Nins' of the Ninja villages. They guard the gates of the Hidden Air village, preventing people to go in and out. And if anyone did sneak in or out of the Hidden Air village, it was their job to kill whoever the trespasser is, even if they were their own kinsmen.

(3) I'm assuming that there is a way to mentally communicate between the clones and their creator. After all, looking at the intricate battle strategies used by Naruto in the series. Even though each clone have their own mind and specific personalities, they are still inherent copies of the original and were created by the original's chakra, so with a bit a twitch, it should be possible for them to communicate among each other mentally. Tell me if I'm wrong people!

(4) Translation for the 'Amaterasu' was inspired by NarutoEx website. They called it the 'Light of the Heavens', so I just shortened it to 'Heavenly Light'.

(5) Um... no one really knows HOW Itachi summons forth that weird fire thingy, but this is how I interpret it... so yeah... if I got it wrong... not my fault, okay?

How do you guys like it so far? I actually didn't have the fight planned out in such a way, but once again, my muse turned out to be rebellious and I finally gave in to it and this is the result. Well, hope you guys liked it. Please read and review. I appreciate all the comments and ideas.

Tsunade

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Two: Tsunade

Okay, this is what told me when they sent me a message saying that one of my stories – Child of Destiny – was deleted (without my knowledge and without my consent).

Main reason for removal: "Not allowed: interactive, chat/script, real person, mst, and etc." The above story has been removed because it violated the guideline detailed on the upload page. This infraction has been recorded and once you reach a certain limit, your account will be automatically banned.

I DON'T WANT TO BE BANNED!!!

So yeah, no more 'reply to reviewers' on the chapters itself. However, I have sent a review myself (the reviewer name is 'reply to reviews', which is currently on the Reviews page) that answers some of the questions that a few of you lovely reviewers have asked me. Anyway, I'll try to keep this new system going. Hopefully, won't be angry about that way either and really kick me off.

Once again, please continue to support me by sending you excellent reviews forth, even though I can't guarantee that I can give you a reply back. Thank you all!

" **Demon's talk**" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

"---" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Warning: Naruto OOC, PG-13. There will be a LOT of jumps in point of views in this chapter, sort of like the previous ones. This basically means that a lot of things are happening at the same time. Hope you don't mind.

Chapter 2

Naruto and Jiraiya had spent the entire next day searching around bars and gambling centres for any information on Tsunade. For his own safety, Naruto had kept his real identity hidden by performing a Henge to mask himself, added with a special Kuunoki Genjutsu technique that could hide his Ninja presence from most Shinobis.

They were very lucky that they did not meet the likes of Itachi and Kisame again during their whole search. It seemed that the Akatsuki members have assumed that the two of them had left hastily, leaving behind two Kage Bunshins instead, and had followed immediately to chase after the imagined pair.

On the plus side, all their hard work finally paid off when Jiraiya and Naruto heard from a local gambler that he had seen the 'legendary sucker' just a few days ago and said she was supposed to be heading towards another town not far from here – Tanzaki city. Happy now that they finally had a lead, both Shinobis immediately set off after the illusive third Legendary Sannin.

Sasuke glared at the window of his room. Since his abrupt and forced return from the pursuit of Itachi, he had been in a VERY bad mood. And now, to make sure that he stayed put, Gai had threatened that he would set up an Anbu guard just to watch the Uchiha heir's every move. To say that Sasuke was furious was an understatement. He had spent most of his first day (unconscious or otherwise) at the hospital nursing his broken wrist into some semblance of movement,

before immediately signing himself out of the hospital and storming home.

Now, as he sat on his rumpled bed in his messy room, with discarded and broken objects all over the floor, he silently fumed. Remembering how his brother had completely ignored his presence and seemingly concentrated on cornering Naruto boiled his rage over. */ It's ALWAYS NARUTO!!! WHY!!!??? What's so F##king SPECIAL about him that EVERYONE has to cater for his BLOODY Whims?! Even ITACHI – THAT BASTARD – has more interest in NARUTO than ME!! And I'M HIS F##KING BROTHER!!! /* He mentally swore to himself, consumed by the darkness and the rage for his brother, Naruto, Gai and the rest of the villagers and Shinobis who had – inadvertently or not – caused him to lose his fight against the man he had sworn to kill.

Reason had left his mind; logic no longer has a place in his heart as it rages over the memories of his encounter with Itachi over and over again. Sasuke was angry, very angry, at everyone and anyone, at the whole world seemingly. Angry at himself for still being so weak and unable to land much damage at his hateful brother, angry at Naruto for catching Itachi's interest in the first place and not caring why, angry at Gai for stopping him, angry at the entire Konoha village for stunting his growth when he knew that he had much more potential than what he had gone through currently. Basically, he was just feeling angry.

/ To have survived a battle against HIM just because I was KNOCKED out! It's worst than before when I F##KING RAN AWAY!!!!/ Sasuke seethed. */ How DARE he!!!??? ITACHI!!! NARUTO!!! HELL!! EVEN KAKASHI could have spent more time making me stronger!!! HOW DARE THEY?!!!! If THEY won't grant me the power I seek, then I'll just find it somewhere else!/* Sasuke continued in his slightly insane mind. */ Yes! That's exactly what I'll do! I'll find another avenue of power. One who is MUCH MORE RELIABLE than Kakashi! MORE POWERFUL THAN NARUTO AND ITACHI! The only person who seems genuinely interested in making*

me strong! Yes... I'll seek you out... But you better be worth my time... Orochimaru.../

"We're getting closer and closer to the Konoha border. So we better be careful from now on. We don't want any of the Hunter Nins, Anbu or Jounins to discover us." Sakon grunted out calmly as he stood on a large tree branch, eyeing the village of the Hidden Leaf some distance away.

"Hey! Why don't we capture some of their pathetic ninjas and play with them for a bit?" Kidomaru asked, while grinning sarcastically as he imagined all the games he could play with a group of Chuunins in his spare time.

"Shut up you a###hole! You heard Orochimaru-sama! No battle until we've actually caught that Uchiha brat!" Tayuya sniffed in a repulsive manner, as if angry that she had to put up with all this crap that surrounds her.

"Tayuya! Enough with the insults." Jiroubu grumbled back, only getting a finger for his troubles. He could only sigh and wonder once again why did he get stuck with such people as his partners and comrades.

"Tonight, we rest. Tomorrow, we sneak into Konoha, find and secure Sasuke-sama and leave. We have to bring him back before Orochimaru-sama's return. Those were the orders by Kabuto-san!" Sakon commanded (1), receiving nods of understanding from the other three members of the Sound four in reply.

"I've finally found you, Tsunade." Orochimaru's snake-like, nasal voice broke through the stunned silence hanging in the air.

Tsunade frowned at her long time comrade turned traitor, nervous and confused as to why he had suddenly appeared in front of her, and yet causing such a racket as to destroy a heritage building as

the old castle along with his entrance. Her assistant –Shizune - simply gapped in shock.

Finally, unable to stand the silence, Tsunade decided to speak out: "It's been a long time, Orochimaru." She paused slightly for effect. "Why? Why have you seeked me out?" She threatened slightly, eyes narrowing in suspicion and anger.

"I have a little favour to ask of you." Orochimaru replied calmly. Tsunade's eyes narrowed even further. "As you can probably tell by now, I need you to heal my arms." He concluded soon after.

"No." Tsunade immediately responded. "I'm not a doctor anymore." She explained determinately. "And even if I were, I wouldn't help a traitor like you." She sneered angrily.

"You don't understand, Tsunade-sama." Kabuto tried to act as a mediator, calming both sides. "Orochimaru's injuries... Only *you* can cure them. No one else." He tried to explain.

"How the hell did you receive such a serious wound on your arm anyway?" Tsunade ignored Kabuto's reasons and went straight to the point, wanting to figure out what Orochimaru had done to deserve what he received.

"Heh." Orochimaru smirked nastily. "Just a little memento from when I killed the Third."

A long silence lasted among the four visible Shinobis, all of whom were at a standstill. However, that silence was never meant to last. Suddenly, Shizune launched herself into a defensive position, lifting up her left arm's sleeve and pulling out several strings on the device attached to her arm, releasing several deadly poison needles at the hateful Orochimaru; all of which were stopped by Kabuto.

"Shizune!" Tsunade warned in a threatening manner, instantly halting her assistant's moves. Seeing that her assistant had calmed down slightly, Tsunade directed her glare at Orochimaru. "Are you telling

me... Orochimaru... that you killed the Sandaime Hokage?" She asked in a very low, threatening voice.

Orochimaru continued to smirk nonchalantly. "Yes. Though it wasn't such a horrible death and it hadn't lasted as long as I wanted it too. Too bad really... I had wanted to mutilate his body... like how your two loved ones were mutilated.(2)"

A loud slam from Tsunade's fist hitting the stone wall behind her had resulting in an entire length of wall to crumble onto the ground like small pebbles. "I'll kill you, bastard!" Tsunade's eyes had widened with an angry glint visible, her killing intent had risen exponentially with Orochimaru's last comment. "You have 5 seconds to leave before I attack. Starting now. ONE!" She called, steadying her body into an attack stance, since she knew that her former teammate would never leave until he got what he wanted.

"TWO!" Tsunade called.

"Tsunade-sama. Listen to reason. You're the only person who can heal Orochimaru-sama's wounds." Kabuto pleaded.

"THREE!" Shizune, too, settled into a defensive stance.

"Please calm down. We do have a very good offer for you!" Kabuto tried one last time before sighing in defeat.

"FOUR!" Fists clenched in anger and readiness.

Orochimaru interrupted the count down. "I can bring your brother, and the man you loved back to life... with the forbidden jutsu I have developed." Another silence settled among the group as the two female Shinobis took the time to allow themselves to digest the information. "Don't you want to see them again, Tsunade? Their smiling faces, their laughing cheers?" Orochimaru continued to market his offer with a sleazy tone of voice. Seeing that he had Tsunade's total attention, he asked finally. "Do we have a deal?"

Considering the offer slightly, Tsunade took the time to ask: "If I heal your hand, what would you do?"

"I'll destroy Konoha with my very own hands." Orochimaru answered calmly, as if it was very obvious.

Shizune's anger boiled over. "Destroy Konoha?!" She exclaimed. Looking over at Tsunade's indecisive expression, Shizune just couldn't take it anymore. "Are you seriously considering their offer? Tsunade-sama?! Didn't you hear what they're going to be doing?! They're planning on DESTROYING KONOHA!! Konoha! Our home!!" She cried out. Trying a different avenue of argument, Shizune continued. "Please don't be fooled by their tricks! Your brother and my uncle (3) risked their very LIVES to protect Konoha!! Don't forget their dreams, their hopes, and their life goals! YOUR DREAMS AND HOPE! Tsunade-sama! You're..."

"SILENCE SHIZUNE!!" Tsunade had to literally shout to be heard.

"You don't need to reply immediately. We'll give you two days to think over our proposal, but we'll definitely need an answer by the third day, here, at 10am sharp." Kabuto formalised. "Also, the forbidden seals require some sacrifices, please bring with you two bodies, suitable for transfer."

"Damn it! Don't think we've already decided to help you! We're not going to help you slimy traitor, YOU HEAR!!" Shizune tried to rebut Kabuto's offer, though knowing that without Tsunade's help, she was definitely unable to defeat Orochimaru.

Orochimaru suddenly decided to bite his own-bandaged finger and let a drop of blood flow out of it. Tsunade's reactions were instantaneous, she scooted back rapidly, terrified of the red liquid of life. Her body, out of her control, started shivering nervously with fright.

"Still afraid of blood I see." Orochimaru paused for the effects of Tsunade's shaking to ease a bit. Seeing that she doesn't seem to be

recovering anytime soon, he decided to leave it at that. "Tsunade, I expect a good answer from you three days from now. One beneficial to us both." With that said, both Kabuto and himself disappeared into clouds of smoke.

Looking sorrowfully at Tsunade, Shizune sighed, even as her body relaxed into mental exhaustion. / *Oh... Tsunade-sama...* / Tsunade continued to shake, clutching almost desperately to her necklace.

Naruto smoothed his hands over the rigid surfaces of the scattered rocks on the floor. What had once been a stable and firm stonewall lay scattered among the demolished remains. He grunted to Jiraiya in annoyance, knowing that something important had happened here and they were too late to witness it. They had only been a few minutes away when they saw a giant snake in the distance suddenly appearing, destroying the old castle in its wake and then disappearing again. It was obvious that Orochimaru was near by, but both couldn't understand why he would appear here and now unless he too, was in the search of the Legendary Medic-nin, Tsunade. And anything that involves Orochimaru is bound to be bad for Konoha.

Jiraiya sighed in the background, shaking his head in irritation. "Damn. We were too late." Looking over the rumble of stone, sand and dust, he continued. "This is definitely Tsunade's work, she has this freakish strength behind all her punches." Shaking his head in contemplation, Jiraiya finally called out to his pupil. "Oi, Naruto. Let's go. We may still be able to catch up to her in town." But the boy remained unmoving. "Naruto?"

"Just wait a minute, Jiraiya. I want to try something." Naruto called back, without removing his hand from the stone rumble.

Frowning at the waste of time, Jiraiya asked: "What? What the hell are you planning, Naruto?" He inquired, slightly curious and yet slightly irritated at the waste of time.

"You remember what I told you about the Yochigan, right?" The blonde boy asked earnestly.

"Yeah, what does that have to do with anything?" Jiraiya's eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion. He wondered what did that have to do with anything.

"Do remember that the Yochigan can let me see the past as well as the future?" Naruto continued listing out his thoughts.

"You mean..." Dawning in realisation, Jiraiya asked for clarification. "You want to try it? Now?!" Understanding that was exactly what the boy planned, Jiraiya just had to protest. "Naruto, you don't even know whether you can control it, let alone do it during such an important stage in our search!"

"Damn it, Ero-Sennin! Listen to me! If this works, I'd find out what the hell Orochimaru did here and find out what's happening in the past as well as what would happen in the future! The advantages outweigh all the cons!" Naruto was convinced that it would work.

"Naruto. YOU listen to me. I don't want you to start bleeding all over the place, especially from your eyes. Do you know that you could be BLIND if you use that technique too much." Jiraiya continued to exclaim. Truthfully, he had always found the Uzumaki clan's Yochigan technique to be rather creepy. What type of eye bloodline ability would let the user bleed from their very eyes, it just wasn't safe.

Ignoring the white haired man's exclamations, Naruto made his decision. "I've got to try." With that said, Naruto placed his hands on an undamaged part of the wall. Closing his eyes, he firmly concentrated on activating his bloodline limit ability. / YOCHIGAN! /

Once again, a sudden flare of pain from his stomach, heart and behind his eyes were the only warning he received before the onslaught of images invaded his mind's eye. Naruto squeezed his eyes tightly shut, forcefully calming his breath and telling his brain to

manually categories each and every image that had suddenly raided his inner mind.

- - - - - ***(Um... This is inside Naruto's mind)***

It was like being inside an infinite space with bubbles of information anywhere and everywhere surrounding you, and you just didn't know what to do. Taking his time, Naruto's figurative mind raised its imaginary hands towards one of the bubbles closest to him, grasping it firmly and slowly processed the memories of past events or future happenings from within. This particular memory or past event showed Orochimaru and Tsunade's conversation from only a few minutes ago. Naruto was glad that he now could understand what had happened.

It appears that Orochimaru had sought Tsunade's help to heal his damaged arms, and in return, had offered to revive Tsunade's loved ones. And the worst thing is that Tsunade seemed to be considering his offer as well. */ Damn! And here I thought she was a strong woman like Aunt Ruri. Shit! What the hell am I suppose to do now!? /* Naruto thought to himself as he continued to ignore the rest of the bubbling information swarming his mind continuously.

Releasing that particular bubble, he grasped onto another, hoping it would give him an idea as to what to do from now on. Instead, he found himself reviewing the battle between Orochimaru and the third Hokage which had occurred mere days before. */ So that's what happened. I always wondered how the third Hokage sealed Orochimaru's arms. Now I know... But that doesn't help me! /*

Almost physically throwing that particular information bubble away, Naruto reached sideways to grasp onto another. This one showed him Tsunade's past – her gift towards her younger brother's twelfth birthday – and his subsequent death the very next day. */ I see... /* Naruto thought to himself sympathetically. Gently releasing this ball, he found another. This one about Tsunade's first and only love, a kind man named 'Dan', who also fell to the curse of the first Hokage's necklace. Naruto's heart ached silently for her lost, but his

determination forced him to continue and delve into her past even more, needing to know what drove this woman, what her weaknesses were, what she was like – inside and out.

The next information bubble that came into his grasp was much more surprising than he would have ever thought. A beautiful woman, looking in her early twenties, with long, mid-night black hair, tied into two low pigtails behind her; her eyes as sharp and icy-looking as blue glaciers. Upon her forehead stood the familiar symbol of the Uzumaki Breed house, and the most notable part was that Naruto recognised her.

This young woman, was none other than his ancestor, his grandmother in fact, the often hated Uzumaki Rika (4) – who committed suicide only months after discovering the truth of her husband's death, leaving behind two daughters aged only 5 (Yuuki) and 10 (Ruri). Not many people took the time to get to know his grandmother, and as such, all Naruto knew about her was that she had always been a very bitter and rude person, hateful of the world that surrounds her, which was why she had spent most of her life in seclusion under the watchful eye of the Council seven (5).

To find out that Tsunade had known his grandmother, and probably on a very personal level, was incredibly shocking to Naruto. / *How?! WHY?! How did she know about... how did she met... Grandma??!* / The whole point of calling this long dead person 'grandma' was rather disturbing to Naruto. In fact, he promised himself it would probably be safer (if a little rude and disrespectful) to refer to her as simply 'Lady Rika' instead.

Wanting to delve even deeper into the memory, Naruto had to suddenly suppress a scream of pain when a hot flash of stinging sensation started burning at the back of his eyes. It was a warning that he had spent too long using the Yochigan. / *Shit! I don't have any time left! I still need to look into the future to find out where she went!!* / Grasping a few more images from Tsunade's past was all Naruto could manage to do before he pushed the bubble away to try

and finish what he was suppose to do in the first place – look into the future and find out where they would meet Tsunade.

Determined to at least get that done, Naruto mentally rushed through the rest of the bubbles until he found the one he was looking for, all the while, the burning sensation at the back of his eyes flared continuously and slowly spread the pain to the middle of his head, causing a massive throbbing pain in its wake. Naruto ignored the pain as best he could and concentrated on the future glimpses that his Yochigan was able to display to him before it completely fails. / *It's a bar... on... on the western side of this town... 3 kilometres from here...* / And that was when Naruto's world turned completely black, as if someone had suddenly turned off the light. Unbeknownst to him, his body had suffered a mental breakdown and his mind had completely shut off, leaving him unconscious and oblivious to the world around him.

- - - - - **(Back to reality)**

Naruto woke to the rough movements of his chest and head knocking constantly onto a backpack of sorts. He opened his eyes only to find the world in complete blackness. Tensing in fear and unsure as to what's going on, Naruto relaxed slightly when he recognised the voice of the person who was talking to him.

"Hey, kid. You awake now?" Jiraiya's concerned voice broke through the darkness.

Nodding slightly, Naruto tried to answer verbally, though his voice was raw for reasons he was unsure of. "Ye... Yeah. Why is the world black?" He asked innocently.

Jiraiya sighed heavily. "You bled a lot, Naruto. From your eyes, I mean. I had to change the bandages 3 times over because the blood kept on soaking through. I told you not to use that damn technique, kid! Why didn't you listen to me?!" Jiraiya shouted at the currently blind boy.

Naruto hid his face behind Jiraiya even as he clutch onto the older man tighter than necessary, considering the man was piggybacking him along. "I'm sorry." Naruto mumbled softly, as if afraid of the on-coming reprimand.

Jiraiya sighed again before physically shrugging his shoulders. "It's okay. Just... Just don't do it again, 'k? I don't think you can handle the massive load of the Yochigan technique yet."

Naruto nodded mutely, still trying to gain his bearings when he knew he probably couldn't see through his damaged eyes, even without the bandage covering it. However, when he remembered what he had found out through the use of the Yochigan itself, Naruto decided that it was worth it using such a dangerous technique. "Oi. Jiraiya." He called softly.

"What?" Jiraiya responded in a tired and irritated voice.

"To the west side of the town there is local restaurant bar. Tsunade and her assistant Shizune is waiting there. That is where we'll find them." Naruto answered demurely before falling into a light yet uncomfortable sleep.

Jiraiya paused slightly in movement, not sure whether he should praise the boy or call him an idiot. Finally deciding to just let it go, Jiraiya continued on, still carrying the unmoving Naruto on his back, but this time, heading in the direction that Naruto had said to go.

"Jiraiya!!" Tsunade's wide-eyed expression betrayed her shock at seeing another of her former teammates suddenly turn up out of nowhere.

Jiraiya only gave her a heavy sigh before smiling crookedly. "I've finally found you." Placing the softly sleeping Naruto across from Shizune, Jiraiya all but collapsed onto the other side of the seat, across from Tsunade.

Tsunade huffed irritably. "Today seems to be a day of reunions it seems..."

"What happened between you and Orochimaru?" Jiraiya went straight to the point even while Naruto slowly woke up from his short slumber.

"Nothing." Tsunade answered succinctly, which was far more suspicious on its own than anything else she could of said. "Just some greetings... that's all." She tried to elaborate. "Besides. What's your business here anyway?" She changed the subject.

Ignoring Tsunade's strange behaviour for now, Jiraiya went straight to the point. "Tsunade, the Leaf village had requested you to take up the Godaime Hokage title." Pausing to let the two women swallow that bit of information, Jiraiya continued on with his explanation. "You've both probably heard about the Third by now, at least from Orochimaru's mouth..." He sneered slightly, angry that his former teammate could betray them to such an extent.

"Yeah... I've heard..." Tsunade murmured. It seems that was all they could say to one another, too lost in their own thoughts, that is, until Naruto interrupted them.

"So... what's your answer? Will you accept the job?" Jiraiya asked, though internally, he had probably guessed at her answer.

After a short pause, Tsunade smirked sarcastically at the white haired man. "My answer is no." Jiraiya narrowed his eyes slightly as his suspicions were proven right while Shizune just gave him a pleading look not to start anything here in such a public place. Naruto remained unmoved.

"Is that how you repay the village, how you repay the Third?" Jiraiya asked low in his voice, almost like a threatening mumble.

Tsunade shrugged nonchalantly at Jiraiya's visibly displayed anger. "Through out the history of Konoha, for every Hokage, they have

thrown their lives away for the village. Life isn't like money. Only an idiot bets his life so easily. I'm not one of those idiots."

A tense pause ensured between the two legendary Sennin. Shizune was looking nervously between the two, wondering how long it would take before they were at each other's throats. Just when she was about to step in, Naruto interrupted their conversation, completely changing the subject while still placing the pressure firmly on Tsunade.

"What will be your answer three days from now, Tsunade-hime?" Naruto asked quietly, with a deceptively steel tone behind his innocent question.

Both Tsunade and Shizune looked at the boy in slight shock; worried that he had caught on to something he shouldn't of, while Jiraiya just looked on in confusion. Steeling her nerve, Tsunade looked back at Jiraiya instead. "Who's the brat?" She scoffed with a bit of anger.

Jiraiya smirked and was about to answer when once again when Naruto beat him to the punch. "My name is Uzumaki Naruto... container of the Kyuubi no Kitsune, son of Uzumaki Yuuki and grandson of Uzumaki Rika. I believe you know of her, am I right?" He answered succinctly.

Tsunade had paled considerably when he mentioned the word 'Uzumaki' and especially so when he mentioned 'Rika'. "You! You're her..." She tried to pull the words out of her mouth but all seemed to be stuck around her throat, unwilling to come forth.

"Yes. I'm THAT Uzumaki heir." Naruto answered the silent question, knowing that it was probably what she wanted to know.

Looking away from the blonde haired boy, Tsunade murmured softly to herself. "I see."

Another tense silence lasted between the two, leaving both Shizune and Jiraiya confused as to the actual tension in the air. About to ask

what the two was talking about, Jiraiya's question died in his throat when Tsunade suddenly stood up from her chair and left the table abruptly, surprising everyone that was left behind.

Suppressing his anger from being brushed aside in such a rude manner, Naruto growled irately: "Are you going to follow *her* footsteps?"

Once again, Tsunade abruptly stopped mid-step, hearing Naruto's murmured words had brought back even more unwelcomed memories from her past that she had tried so hard to forget. Without ever commenting, Tsunade strode forward once again, leaving an irate Naruto and a confused Jiraiya and Shizune behind. Seeing that her mistress was truly leaving the Inn, Shizune quickly got off her seat and followed the blonde woman out, bowing apologetically to Jiraiya before she left.

Jiraiya glanced back curiously at Naruto. "What the hell was that about?"

"Nothing." Naruto ground out, losing his appetite for dinner completely.

Tsunade gazed forlornly at the crystal stone clutched within her hands. She had fled the accusing voice of the Uzumaki heir only to find seclusion upon one of the torii (wooden gate) monuments outside the entrance to Tanzaki city (6). The more she looked upon the accursed necklace, the more painful memories invaded her once empty mind. *I Nawaki... Dan... and... Rika-sensei... What should I do now? ... What should I do now? I*

She remembered her brother's stubborn words.

(FLASHBACK)

" Because becoming the Hokage is my dream!" Nawaki cheerfully exclaimed to his sister while smiling cheekily at the same time.

(END FLASHBACK)

A sad smile appeared on Tsunade's face shortly but it soon disappeared as she remembered the horrible way he had died the very next day. Slowly, the memories turned to her lover – or at least – the man whom she had loved, Dan.

(FLASHBACK)

" The one who protects everyone... becoming the Hokage is my dream." Dan gave her a very determined look, coupled by a calm smile.

(END FLASHBACK)

More tears had dripped down her face as she remembered how useless she had felt while trying desperately to heal Dan's severe wounds. It was then that she developed her fear of blood. How much more blood could be stained upon her hands before she loses it? As a Medic Nin, her whole purpose within the Ninja world was to save lives, and yet, she couldn't even save her loved ones life, one who was worth so much to her.

She was weak, useless, and pathetic. Without Dan and Nawaki, what was her life worth? And not only that, anyone who got close to her may well die that kind of horrible death. In this sense, it was much safer to stay away – safer for her and for those around her. Like the crystal within her hand, she too, was cursed to always survive the death of her loved ones, that, she firmly believed.

/ I'm a Medic Ninja... heh... during that time, there was no such thing as a Medic Ninja... if I had not taken the opportunity during the temporary peace to attend the special Air Village invitation, I wouldn't even have learnt the techniques of a real Medic Nin... / Tsunade frowned as she remembered how the Hokage, at the time had frowned upon her suggestion of training Medic Nins to accompany every group of Ninjas dispatched, but then again, he was the first to

give her the invite for attending the special summit within the Kuunoki walls.

It was within the very walls of the Hidden Air village that Tsunade learnt the tricks of her trade, the advance Medical Shinobi techniques that had been sealed from the rest of the world. / Uzumaki... Dokudes... They were the best-known Medic Ninjas in the world... but they were always so secretive about their techniques... I was the first apprentice to be accepted into the Air village to be trained... Rika-sensei... have I been a disappointment? ... I'm about to do the same mistake that you did. Am I wrong to want to see them one more time? /

(FLASHBACK)

" Hi! My name is Tsunade. I'm from the Hidden Leaf Village in the..." a 19 year old Tsunade bowed formally in front of her new sensei as a show of peace and respect.

" I know who you are and I know why you're here." The young woman in front of her replied succinctly, giving the impression that she would rather get straight to the point as soon as possible.

Tsunade had heard rumours about the infamous Uzumaki Rika – supposedly the best Medic Ninja in the entire Air village though not acknowledged for her talent. One example of this woman's great miracle feats would be her looks - Uzumaki Rika was actually in her mid thirties though she looked no older than in her early twenties. A daughter of a Uzumaki father and a Dokudes mother, Rika had inherited the great know-ledges from two of the Air village's greatest clans. However, upon their first meeting, Tsunade knew that most of the rumours about Rika's attitude and behaviours were true. She was definitely a rude, argumentative and bitter woman, one who would take no scorn from anyone. And if push comes to shush, she would definitely shove right back, with more force than needed.

(END FLASHBACK)

Tsunade laughed at the bitter memories of her second sensei and of all the times that they had argued against each other. Next to Sarutobi-sensei, Rika was probably the only other person Tsunade had ever really respected.

Though bitter, angry and often hateful of the world as a whole for the injustices that existed, Rika had proven time and time again that she was only a woman. An ordinary woman who had tried so very hard to find a place of her own within the confines of a village that only wanted to use her for her blood. Only a regular woman who fell for the same cycle of love and lost as many other women in the rest of the world. One who would fall for the same depression and confusion as any other if the foundations of her world had been crushed from beneath her. Just like Rika, Tsunade had found herself following in her sensei's footsteps almost to the step.

(FLASHBACK)

" Sensei?! Wha... what are you doing?"

" Please... please help me, Tsunade..."

" I... I don't understand..."

" I want to... no I NEED to bring him back... I just... I just want to see him again... Please... I just NEED to see him ONE more time!"

" You're talking about Yakumo-san, aren't you?"

" HE WAS THE ONLY MAN I'VE EVER LOVED! THE ONLY MAN I'LL EVER LOVE... But more importantly, he loved me! As I am! He loved me for who I am not what I am! I... I just need to see him one more time. Please, Tsunade! Help me."

" I... I'll help. If this works, then maybe... maybe Nawaki and Dan..."

(END FLASHBACK) (7)

But it was not to be, whatever they were able to transfuse from the dead remains of men and women they were able to compile together – the thing that resulted from their experiments – it wasn't human. Two months after the incident, Rika committed suicide to join her one true love in either heaven or hell, leaving behind her 5-year-old daughter (Yuuki) in the care of her older brother – the Prophet house master – Uzumaki Tenka and his apprentice, Ruri.

More tears ran down Tsunade's already wet face as the open wound of what she had tried to do in the past all came back to haunt her. / *We were wrong, Rika-sensei! And now... I'm about to embark on the same path again... Am I going to follow in your course in life? Am I going to make the same mistakes as you? Am I going to let the lost of my loved ones eat me alive like it did you? ... I don't know anymore... /*

Naruto had to wait until almost noon the next day before his eyes had finally recovered from the stress of the Yochigan the day before. The bleeding had stopped some time during the night but the intense headache that still plagued his mind now and again continued until mid morning. The glazed or double vision of his eyesight didn't disappear until almost noon.

Sighing happily at his recovery, Naruto made a mental note to himself NOT to use that technique for too long a period ever again. It was simply too dangerous, especially if he'd be in a battle situation. He really didn't know how his Aunt could handle the Yochigan so well, but then again, she had been trained into her position since infancy, something that didn't happen to Naruto until he was about nine years old. Thinking about his aunt had brought back memories of his conversation with his Grandmother's only disciple.

Unlike most other Ninja villages, the Hidden Air village did not have a structured list of ranks for their own Shinobis. Every fell into three simple groups: Shinobi, Clan master, or Ruling council. Everyone that has ever lived in the Kuunoki no Sato is considered a 'Shinobi' because everyone could and would fight. A Clan master is the most

powerful member of a particular clan and shall be involved in many of the open discussions among the ruling councils. The Ruling Council board of directors consisted of the Uzumaki family (Prophet house only), the Council Seven as well as the ten Gate Guardians (ten of the most powerful Clan masters) in charge of the security of the village. With everyone either belonging to one or more of these three categories, coupled with the fact that the Hidden Air village is a VERY SMALL village, each person is allowed to take up to 3 apprentices through out their life times.

The Kuunokigakure no Sato did not have an academy that teaches beginners, every student are to be taught under their own clan members or as an apprentice to another Kuunoki Shinobi. Tsunade had been the first and only apprentice of Uzumaki Rika, the best Medic Ninja at the time. It was through her that Tsunade had learnt much of the basics of healing and causing damage to the human body with a single touch. It was also probably through her that Tsunade was able to develop her own unique Jutsu that hid her true age; after all, Rika was famous for masking her real age behind a young façade.

And unlike most other villages, the Shinobis of the Kuunoki always start their lessons young, most of them have learnt how to control their Chakra even before they reach their sixth birthday. That was one disadvantage that Naruto still finds himself behind on, he would probably never be able to reach the same level of absolute Chakra manipulation as the rest of the Kuunoki villagers but knowing that he probably has more stamina in storage than any of them added together gave him his pride back.

Shaking his head, Naruto rid himself of all his wondering thoughts to concentrate on what he should be doing at hand. Knowing that he shouldn't stress his body out, especially straight after the effects of the Yochigan wears off, Naruto decided to just hide inside his room for the rest of the day. He really didn't want to confront Tsunade about the rude things he had said to her yesterday. It was just that he was surprised, unbalanced and rather frustrated by the fact that

she had known his grandmother, someone who he never thought he would ever know. It was difficult for him to reconcile the images of Rika from Tsunade's memories to the stories told from the old villagers of the Kuunoki.

It was a well-known fact that Rika had tried to defy the Council Seven a long time ago and had been placed under house arrest for the rest of her life as a punishment. Everyone knew that she was only still alive because they needed her to give birth to the next Uzumaki Prophet and Breed generation. As such, she had refused to marry. It wasn't until a tournament was hosted afterward to find her a suitable mate that she was soon married her off to Yakumo Fuujin, a Cloud Ninja and Naruto's grandfather.

Naruto didn't really know the specifics about the rest of the story but supposedly, his grandfather died in the war and Rika had killed herself not long after. Even Aunt Ruri had been rather tight lipped about her own mother's true conduct but then again, she had her mother had never been close. In fact, many suspected that the two hadn't even met after Ruri had been taken into the Prophet house instead of being placed under her mother's care.

All this complex blood relations and his intricate family tree were confusing the hell out of Naruto and he firmly told himself NOT to think about it.

Two days had passed since her encounter with Orochimaru and Tsunade was nowhere near finalising her decision upon his offer. On one hand, if he were able to do as he said he would, she would be able to see Nawaki and Dan again. Just seeing their smiling faces even once was enough to satisfy her. But then... she remembered what had happened to Rika and all her hopes would crumble down to dust.

Rika's theory had been accurate, it was suppose to transfuse several dead bodies and bring back one live, completely human body, coupled with another special Jutsu to bring back their soul. The

theory was correct but it was the person who actually activated the procedure that was wrong. What they had done... it wasn't right... not ethically or morally. It just wasn't right. Humans were never meant to live forever, and as such, it was wrong of them to try and bring the dead back. Tsunade knew this. She knew it very well and yet the temptation of seeing her beloved ones were still strong.

She was so focussed on her inner thoughts that she hadn't noticed the person in front of her before they crashed into each other. Due to the fact that she had just been turning a corner, coupled with the force of the impact between them, Tsunade soon found herself sitting in a rather undignified pose upon the dusty ground. She glared forward at the person she bumped into, only to meet the firm, bright blue eyes of Uzumaki Naruto. / *Those eyes... their the same eyes that she had... The Uzumaki lineage – Sky blue eyes...* / She thought to herself as she instantly recognised the resemblance between Naruto and his ancestors, while still straightening herself upright off the ground.

Naruto narrowed his eyes slightly at the person who had so unceremoniously bumped into him. It had been more then two days since he had met up with Tsunade and luckily, for the both of them, they haven't encountered each other since. He knew that Jiraiya had been trying to talk her into taking the Hokage's position almost every single night, which was why the old man often returned drunk and suffering a severe hangover the next day. But Naruto himself have been doing his best to avoid her. Why though, he wasn't exactly sure. But one thing he was sure about is that he needed to talk to her, and running away from the problem won't help any of them.

Standing up and dusting away any dirt that was attached to the bottom of his pants, Naruto gave a heavy sigh before pulling his wits together to look Tsunade right in the eye. "Um... Sorry." Tsunade shrugged at his apology, even though she knew it was probably her fault more than anything else. She was just about to leave on her way too when Naruto interrupted her again. "W... Wait. I... We need to talk." Those few words were all Naruto could manage, but luckily,

Tsunade nodded in acquiescence again, and they both headed off in a mutual direction, towards one of the public parks within Tanzaki city.

A few minutes later found the pair sitting silently on one of the park benches, enjoying the sounds of nature and people walking by. The silence wasn't uncomfortable but it wasn't productive either, so Naruto thought he should probably start the conversation running.

"Um... about the day before... I'm sorry if I sounded patronising... I didn't mean to upset you with my words." He apologised again for his previous actions and waited for her response.

Tsunade nodded almost dully, as if her mind was somewhere else instead. "Tell me. How much do you know of your grandmother?"

Naruto shrugged. "Not much. Aunt Ruri never talks about her and neither does Kaga-san. I asked once but she just remained silent or avoided the question. So far, I've learnt more about Rika from the glimpses of your past than anyone else." He explained.

Tsunade nodded again, narrowing her eyes slightly at recognising the name he had described. "How is Ruri anyway?"

Naruto sighed and shrugged helplessly again. "Well. As high and mighty as she'll always be, I guess. But she was able to weasel her way out of the Air village to attend the Chuunin Exams held in Konoha. That was a surprise."

Tsunade frowned slightly. "And the Council Seven actually gave her permission to leave?!"

Naruto shook his head. "I don't know how she convinced them but somehow, they obliged with her requests on most things that is happening within the Kuunoki. Why? Have you met the Council Seven before?" He asked curiously.

Tsunade nodded. "Yeah, only a few times though. Unfortunately, due to *that* particular incident, I'm now banished from the Kuunoki and won't be allowed to enter unless under extreme conditions. They see me as a traitor of their good will. I was lucky to escape with my life."

After a short pause, Naruto asked quietly. "What was she like? Rika I mean..."

Tsunade gave him a small smile. "She was rude and temperamental, with a very short fuse. But she was a strong woman none the less..."

The two chatted about all sorts of things all afternoon and into the night, never touching on Tsunade's impending decision the very next day. Naruto have decided to give the woman the benefit of the doubt, and trust that she would make the right decision. Until then, he would not judge her on her actions. For all he knew, she may well decline Orochimaru's offer. The chance was still there and he would not ruin it for anything. Only time will tell whether his faith in her is correct or not. *I Faith... I have faith in you, Tsunade-hime. I know you won't make the same mistakes my grandmother did... because you're stronger than her... I*

(1) I'm assuming that Sakon is the leader of the four, I'm actually not very certain about that. Yes, Kimimaro was the leader of the Sound FIVE because he was the strongest, but next to him, who else? Anyone knows?

(2) I'm talking about Tsunade's younger brother. Supposedly (in the manga), his body was so badly mutilated and ripped apart that people couldn't even recognise him.

(3) I heard in the anime series that 'Dan' was Shizune's uncle, is that true? Can anyone else confirm?

(4) Information on Ruri's mother will come out later. She doesn't really play much of a role, so she's not an important OC.

(5) That's one way the Council Seven likes to punish or control the Uzumaki clan.

(6) Episode 91 of Naruto showed Tsunade on one of those strange religious wooden monuments (Shinto religion).

(7) Confused? Okay let me give you a short summary:

Uzumaki Rika (Naruto's grandma) married Yakumo Fuujin (Naruto's grandpa). Rika hated the Air village with a passion and had refused to marry until the old age of around 32 years old. Her husband was the winner of a special tournament held by the Air, the participants came from among the many Shinobi villages – the winner was Yakumo Fuujin of the Hidden Cloud Village. During the war, Yakumo needed to return to his home nation, and help fight and protect it, he died during the war. Rika, devastated by her husband's death, had tried to perform a forbidden jutsu to bring him back from the dead, but she failed. She killed herself after that. (Inspired by Full Metal Alchemist) The timeline of when Tsunade trained under Rika and when she tried to help her revive Yakumo will be discussed later.

Ooooh! What's Tsunade's answer gonna be, I wonder?! XD I think you guys already know. Anyway. The next chapter will have far more action than this chapter, it'll have the Sanin battles (I so hope I can fit it all in) and Naruto's eventual return to Konoha.

For those of you wondering why I'm suddenly changing the plot from the original story line, that is because from this Arc onwards, I will be making my own changes. It'll be slight but the changes will slowly but surely become more dramatic. Hope you enjoy this chapter as well. And remember, Please Review!

Legendary Sannin

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After The Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter Three: Legendary Sannin

Um... people... For this chapter, I haven't had time to reply to any reviews yet so uh... I guess that just means that you should NOT go look for any replies, because I've haven't done them... K? ww;; Gomen nasai... please enjoy the chapter anyway.

" **Demon's talk**" , /Thoughts/, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

"---" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Warning: Naruto OOC, PG-13. There will be a LOT of jumps in point of views in this chapter, sort of like the previous ones. This basically means that a lot of things are happening at the same time. Hope you don't mind.

Chapter 3

Slowly opening her eyes, Shizune couldn't help but groaned out loud due to the pain upon her stomach. Tsunade had certainly NOT pulled any punches when she had so abruptly knocked Shizune out last night.

"Oi, Shizune. Get up. We're late as it already is." A familiar voice called out to her.

Blinking her eyes back into focus, Shizune was finally able to direct her gaze towards the calm eyes of Uzumaki Naruto. Watching him hover slightly over her form and remembering what had happened between her and Tsunade the night before, Shizune quickly launched herself off the ground, almost slipping on her own feet before Naruto managed to grab hold of her arm and steadied her.

"Hey. You shouldn't move around so much. Especially after what you've been through, unless you want to suffer some more vertigo." Naruto chastened her as he held firmly onto the woman's arm until she found her bearings.

Ignoring his advice for the moment, Shizune scanned around at the empty room before finally turning her frantic eyes upon Naruto. "What day is it?! What time?!" Her slightly panicked voice asked desperately.

"Calm down. It's 9 in the morning." Naruto huffed in a slightly irritated manner.

"Tsunade-sama! We have to find Tsunade-sama NOW!" The anxious woman turned her attentions towards the direction of the door and was about to rush towards it when her arm was once again grabbed and held firmly by Naruto. Turning to glare at the impetuous boy, Shizune was slightly put off by the stern and calm expression displayed on the young boy's face.

"No. We wait until Jiraiya returns and then we'll all make the trip back to the area where you and Tsunade first met Orochimaru." Shizune's eye widened at the implication of the boy knowing about their secrets and was about to ask how he had known when Naruto answered the silent question even before she had opened her mouth.

"I'm an Uzumaki. I have the ability to look into the past and the future. I used one of my techniques to glance back into Tsunade's past and that was one of the things I found out about." Pausing to let the information sink in, Naruto tried to calm the girl by stating that they should have more faith in Tsunade's decision. "Let's just trust

Tsunade to make the right choices. For now, we wait and then when the time comes, we act."

Swallowing down her apprehension, Shizune reluctantly nodded. It wasn't long before there was a knock on the doorway and the two opened it to find a drugged Jiraiya leaning heavily against the wall, suffering from the effects of poison. The two spent a while just trying to calm Jiraiya's metabolism but through out the entire time, Naruto had remained completely calm and serene, almost as if he had complete confidence in Tsunade's decision. Soon though, they all left to find the illusive Tsunade and her meeting with the traitor Orochimaru.

Tsunade waited patiently leaning against the opposite stonewall of the one she had crumbled down due to her anger just a few days ago. She was early and decided to spend her time reviewing her decision once and for all, especially in regards to the steps she's about to take and compare them to her former sensei's mistakes.

(FLASHBACK)

" I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... If I had been strong enough... then maybe..." Young Tsunade hugged her knees close to her chest, mostly avoiding the glazed expression on her sensei's face. Gathering enough courage, she lifted her eyes higher and took the time to look over Rika's new appearance. It was such a different sight.

Normally, Rika would have long, beautiful black hair tied into two low pigtails at the back of her neck. Now, all of her hair had turned white, all in one night. Her overall appearance too, had lost its youthful illusion, leaving behind an old woman who was only in her mid-forties but looked more like she was in her eighties instead. And it was all her fault. If the experiment had worked then maybe... maybe everything would be different. Maybe things would go back to the way it was... but it didn't.

Rika sighed sadly, and without glancing at her apprentice, she spoke of regret. "No... It was my fault I dragged you into this." She mumbled in a dry, almost hissing voice, as if her voice box had aged a few decades in just a matter of hours. "It was never meant to be, what we were trying to accomplish. And as such... we were punished for our own foolishness."

Releasing her tense shoulders slightly, Tsunade asked Rika in a soft voice. "Are you going to try again, Sensei?"

Rika gave her a sad smile. "Don't worry. I will see Yakumo-rin some day. And I have a feeling it would be very soon."

Tsunade nodded despondently. There was a long silence between the two now imprisoned in one of the old cells underground. Though Rika is an important pure-blooded Uzumaki, but even she would be punished if she had disobeyed the councillor's orders. Looking back sympathetically at Rika, she remembered her own promises and pain in regards to Nawaki and Dan. And she knew, deep down in her heart, that if the positions were reversed, she would have done the exact same thing as her sensei. That was the sad truth.

As if able to read her mind, Rika interrupted Tsunade's thoughts again. "Please, Tsunade. Don't follow in my path. Don't make the same mistakes that I have done. Don't become a shadow of my life. Follow your own path, have faith in yourself, and define a new way to live... For you are stronger than I am... and as such... I want you to surpass me... I want you to know that I am proud of you; of what you will become in the future... and that you should have faith in yourself and those around you. Faith is the key... Live and learn, Tsunade, for Life itself has much to teach us."

(END FLASHBACK)

Those were the last words that Rika ever told Tsunade. The next day, she was kicked out of the Kuunoki, never to return unless given special permission to. Two months later, Rika died.

"So... The answer is..." Orochimaru seemingly appeared out of nowhere, standing in front of her, startling her but she didn't show her surprise outwardly.

"My answer is..." Tsunade murmured quietly, while she thought over her sensei's words again. */ For the last time, sensei... I'll try... /*

Upon reaching the general area where Tsunade was believed to meet up with Orochimaru, Shizune was just about to rush into the foray when she was, once again, grabbed by Naruto and held firmly.

Glaring back at the boy angrily, Shizune hissed at him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?! Tsunade-sama is standing just beyond a few streets from here with that Snake bastard! Let me GO!"

"Shut up! Shizune!" Naruto commanded, his voice low with a very dangerous threat audible.

Shizune froze at the sudden spark of intense concentration from within Naruto's sky-blue eyes, as if just daring her to go against him. Jiraiya, watching the rising tension between the two tried to dissuade them from starting an argument. "Calm down, both of you. Shizune. It would be foolish of us to just jump down in there and cause a racket. For all we know, Tsunade may have the entire situation under control until we showed up. None the less, we must tread cautiously." He reasoned.

"But what if Tsunade-sama is in a bind and needs our help?!" Shizune insisted.

"Are you that skeptical of Tsunade-hime's abilities and judgement? Don't you even believe in your own mistress?!" Naruto growled at the black haired girl slightly, as if irritated that she would have so little faith in Tsunade.

"I..." Looking shocked at being scolded by a 12 year old none the less, Shizune suddenly looked ashamed. "I just don't want Tsunade-

sama to regret her actions... She's been through too much already..."

Sighing tiredly, Naruto released Shizune's arm and looked at her with a calm gaze. "Whether she regrets it or not, it was her decision. We should respect that. Whatever her choices, she must be the one willing to bear the burdens and punishment. She isn't a child and doesn't need you to watch over her every decision."

Shizune nodded reluctantly, acknowledging the truth as it is being presented to her. She had been rather over-bearing over the years travelling with Tsunade. At first, it was because Tsunade needed a confidant with her, so that she wasn't alone to face the world. But eventually, it became something of a tagging game between the two. Tsunade would choose a place at random and go gambling their money away, leaving behind Shizune to pick up the pieces and be ever watchful over the amount of money they had left.

It was literary a game. One would spend the money in a thoughtless way while the other would pick up the pieces afterwards. This had been going on for so many years that Shizune had almost forgotten about the head strong woman Tsunade use to be, instead of this dependant un-decider that she had become. Shizune had almost forgotten about what her idol was truly capable since she hadn't seen Tsunade go full out in a very long time, and had, shamefully, not placed enough faith in Tsunade's ability to look after herself.

For Shizune, it was quiet a blow to her ego when Naruto figuratively accused her of not supporting her own mistress and teacher. / *I guess... I have been rather selfish lately... taking decisions on my own... ordering Tsunade-sama around as if she were a child... I... I should have more faith in her... Tsunade-sama! I do believe in you! Always.* / Shizune nodded firmly to herself again, promising that she would no longer act for her own selfish reasons and hope that Tsunade would be able to attain her former glory for herself, by herself, without help.

Seeing that Shizune had let go of her previous dependencies, Jiraiya looked away from her to the path they must follow. "Okay. Every

body ready?" Two nods follow in his wake. "Then let's go."

"No." Tsunade answered succinctly. And before Orochimaru could contemplate what she had just finished saying, Tsunade had already launched herself at him. Jumping from the ground, Tsunade lifted her left leg up high, before slamming it down onto the ground, causing the entire earth underneath to shatter and crumble, creating a crater so big, it destroyed the foundations of the stonewalls standing on it. Several houses and other structures disintegrated with the ground itself, all just from one kick by Tsunade.

Orochimaru (who had barely escaped the attack) landed lightly outside of the impact zone, beside him, Kabuto had revealed himself in order to protect his master. "What is THIS?! TSUNADE!!! Betraying me at a time like this!?" Orochimaru hissed angrily at the blonde haired woman, infuriated that she had not only declined his offer but had tried to kill him instead.

"This is exactly what it looks like! I'm going to kill you, you snake bastard!" Tsunade threw aside her green jacket and rushed at Orochimaru again, yelling at the top of her voice. "FOR KONOHA!!!!"
/ For Nawaki's dream of becoming Hokage, for Dan's dream of becoming Hokage, for Rika's faith in me, I will do this for all of them!
/ Tsunade thought to herself mentally.

One punch and the entire length of the alleyway wall collapsed onto the ground. Orochimaru and Kabuto had managed, yet again, to escape, with Tsunade in full pursuit. While jumping from building to building chasing after her quarry, Tsunade was suddenly joined by three other people, namely Naruto, Jiraiya and Shizune.

Frowning curiously at the three, Tsunade was just about to ask them what the hell they were doing when all three spoke at the same time, interrupting her.

"Tsunade-sama. I'm sorry I doubted you even for a second, please forgive me." Shizune pleaded as she gazed sadly at her mistress.

"Heh, Tsunade! You really shocked that bastard with what you said. I don't think I've ever seen Orochimaru so ticked before! Good work!" Jiraiya laughed, completely forgetting the fact that he was still suffering the effects of her drugs.

Naruto gave her a calm stare before his lips twitched to a small smile instead. "I had faith in you, Tsunade-hime." It was all that needed to be said and all four of them focused their attention on the two ahead of them, ready for some action to come.

Landing on the plain landscape of their new chosen battleground, both Orochimaru and Kabuto readied themselves into battle stances, knowing that Tsunade had picked up several followers as a result of her decision.

Biting his fingers to draw some blood, Kabuto reached out towards Orochimaru and helped the man quickly lift the man's left sleeve up, removing the bandages and revealing the summoning tattoo underneath. Still with the bloodied hands, Kabuto hastily swiped his own blood across the tattoo. Then, slamming both of his blood stained palms onto the ground, just as Tsunade and the gang arrived, Kabuto completed his summoning. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu (Summoning no Jutsu)!" Instantly, two giant snakes appeared from a large cloud of smoke, upon one of the snake's head stood both Sound Ninjas.

"Orochimaru!" Jiraiya sneered angrily at his eternal rival.

"Kabuto." Naruto stated calmly as he looked over the Sound spy. He had known a long time ago that Kabuto couldn't be trusted and had just had his suspicions confirmed.

"Long time no see, Naruto-kun. How have you been?" Kabuto called out cheerfully as he popped a soldier pill into his mouth, resupplying himself with much needed Chakra since he had used quite a large amount for the summoning in the first place.

Naruto didn't answer back verbally but his eyes did narrow slightly at the obvious taunt.

"Still galloping around with the Kyuubi brat on your back Jiraiya?" Orochimaru laughed in a mocking manner. "You just never learn, you worthless toad."

Not giving the snake the benefit of seeing him riled up, Jiraiya stayed calm and started strategising their attack sequence. "Tsunade and Shizune, take care of the guy with glasses. Naruto and I will take care of Orochimaru." Pausing to see if the others agreed, Jiraiya was slightly surprised that Tsunade didn't challenge his authority. "But first, Tsunade, I'll need you to heal me of the drugs."

Tsunade shook her head slightly. "The drugs will wear off soon, but until then, if I do anything to your body, it'll harm you more than help you." She replied succinctly.

Jiraiya sighed heavily, even while his eyebrow twitched. */ This just means that I'll have to rely on Naruto more... Damn. /* From the corner of his eyes, Jiraiya could also see Naruto's eyebrow twitching in irritation.

Watching as the four of them interacted in such a friendly manner brought Orochimaru back to situation at hand, they were going to fight... and what a fight it'll be...

Almost as if the silent signal had been given, suddenly, all participants of this great battle launched themselves into the fray. The two giant snakes plunged themselves towards the location of the four Konoha allies, while the four of them jumped away to avoid the impact. With all four landing in different directions, the snakes diverged themselves towards their various prey. One snake, with Orochimaru on top of its head headed straight for Jiraiya, while another went after Naruto, leaving Kabuto (who had jumped off his own snake's head beforehand) to battle it out with Tsunade and Shizune.

----- **(Jiraiya Vs Orochimaru)**

"Doton: Yomi Numa! (Earth Element: Swamp of the Underworld)" Jiraiya yelled as he performed his own Jutsu. However, to his disappointment, the swamp he summoned wasn't even big enough to swallow the entire snake whole. Nevertheless, it was big enough to keep the giant snake busy anyway, giving him the chance to battle it out with Orochimaru himself. Knowing that his Chakra control wasn't up to standards, Jiraiya decided to avoid trying any summons unless absolutely necessary.

Seeing that Orochimaru started rushing towards his direction, Jiraiya quickly performed another set of seals to protect himself. "Hari Jizo! (Needle Guardians)" Jiraiya called to himself as his long white hair elongated even more and started spiking upwards into different directions, resulting in him looking more like a porcupine instead of a person.

Orochimaru suddenly stretched forth his neck and left leg towards Jiraiya, even while his body stopped moving forward. Stepping lightly onto the deadly spines of Jiraiya's hair, Orochimaru's head twisted and turned until he found a way to bite Jiraiya's neck while avoiding most of the spines in the process. "Heh heh... I got you now..." Orochimaru mumbled while his sharp, snake-like teeth sunk deeper into Jiraiya's neck.

/ DAMN IT! / Jiraiya swore to himself mentally as he reacted instinctively, lifting his right leg, still covered in spines, Jiraiya launched a kick upwards aiming for Orochimaru's head. Orochimaru was forced to release Jiraiya's neck if he wanted to avoid being hit from behind by Jiraiya's feet. Jumping backwards to a safe distance, Orochimaru's long tongue laved around his pale face in a psychotically self-conscious way, making Jiraiya almost puke in disgust.

Rubbing the bite mark on his neck dejectedly, Jiraiya gave Orochimaru his full glare of hatred and disgust, swearing to himself

that he would get Orochimaru back for this humiliation. After a short pause, the two launched themselves at each other again.

Jiraiya threw several shurikens towards Orochimaru before performing a set of consecutive seals. "Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" The few shurikens suddenly multiplied into several dozens more of flying weapons (since Jiraiya's Chakra control still wasn't up to standard, he wasn't able to summon more), all directed towards Orochimaru.

Upon seeing the dozens of shurikens heading his way, Orochimaru called forth his mystical sword from his very bowels. The Kusanagi (Grass Cutter) sword rose from tip to hilt emerging from the jaws of a snake inside Orochimaru's throat. When fully emerged, Orochimaru twisted his very head, angling his own jaw precisely just so that the Kusanagi could deflect several of the incoming shurikens coming his way.

However, knowing that he didn't have the time or energy to deal with the remaining shurikens, Orochimaru opted for retreat instead. Somersaulting backwards while withdrawing the Kusanagi, Orochimaru flipped backwards a few times without using his hands for leverage. He finally stopped moving backwards when all the Shurikens had been embedded into the flesh of the giant snake that both he and Jiraiya were fighting atop. Without the threat of oncoming shurikens anymore, Orochimaru gleefully launched himself at his rival again, this time, aiming to kill.

Jiraiya, noticing that his attack hadn't done as much damage as he'd hoped, and seeing that Orochimaru was now rushing at him in high speed (with the Kusanagi re-summoned and aimed directly at him), didn't really leave much time or choice on the type of defensive manoeuvre he could use. He quickly finished a set of hand seals, resulting in his hands being covered by a sparkling mass of Chakra.

Waiting for just the perfect moment when Orochimaru had reached his destination, and ready to swing the Kusanagi downward to impale the white haired man, Jiraiya all but suddenly clamped the

sword's descent between his two bare hands, stopping the sword's plunge just centimetres from his actual head. Slightly confused by why Jiraiya opted to block his sword in such a way instead of just fleeing, Orochimaru didn't want to waste any more time on the toad Sennin, so he released his long tongue to do some more mayhem to the white haired man.

Jiraiya, having just blocked the sword's descent, firmly activated the effects of his previous jutsu performed. "Raikan Mahi no Jutsu! (Lightning Shock Paralysis)" He called out as lightning literary was formed from his Chakra, travelling through the metal medium of the Kusanagi sword and entering Orochimaru's very body, electrocuting him in the process. However, Orochimaru's tongue had just wrapped itself around Jiraiya's ankle when the snake man suddenly felt the electrifying effects of Jiraiya's Jutsu, of which, the electrical currents followed Orochimaru's tongue all the way back into Jiraiya. As a result, both men were electrocuted quite severely since Jiraiya hadn't stopped his Jutsu just yet.

Finally unable to withstand the effects of his own electrical attack, Jiraiya quickly called off the attack, jumping backwards as much as his shivering legs could take him before collapsing onto his knees, still sitting on the giant snake's back. He was surprised the snake still hadn't disappeared yet since he knew that the snake itself would also feel the electrifying effects of the Raikan Mahi (Lightning Shock Paralysis), and not to mention that it was currently stuck inside his Yomi Numa (Underworld Swamp) of which the liquid material must have been able to hold an electrical current of its own.

Shaking his head to dispel his curiosity about the snake underneath him, Jiraiya concentrated on Orochimaru instead. Though singed and shaking severely atop the giant snake's surface, Orochimaru seemed to be in the same predicament as Jiraiya, simply suffering the paralysis stage of the Jutsu. */ Well... with the amount of current I charged into that Jutsu, I think the paralysis on both of us would last a few more minutes still.* / Jiraiya confirmed to himself. Though disappointed that he wouldn't be able to kill the snake due to his own

body's shocked paralysis, Jiraiya was still content to watch Orochimaru rage over his own body's immobility.

"What... What Jutsu did you use? ... It wasn't... Konoha..."
Orochimaru managed to hiss out painfully since his teeth, jaw and tongue still weren't moving properly to enable him to talk accurately.

Giving the snake a shaky smirk, Jiraiya answered haughtily, but still shakily. "A Kuunoki Jutsu. There are advantages to having a disciple that is connected to the Air village. Sometimes, it's the master that learns from the student, and not the other way around." He managed to philosophise before the shaking of his body became too intense in shaking for him to even talk.

----- **(Naruto Vs Snake)**

Dodging the snake wherever he went, Naruto decided to end this little charade by finishing off the snake as quickly as possible and to go help out the others. Evading a powerful swipe of the giant snake's tail, Naruto suddenly jumped on top of its body and started running towards the direction of its head. The snake tried to get the little rat off itself by twisting its body into a tight spiral, continuously crushing one side of its body onto the ground and rubbing itself against the earth's hard surface. Somehow, Naruto managed to continue running up the snake's ever-moving body, while keeping away from the side that the snake was trying to crush against the earth.

Soon though, He finally managed to reach the snake's head. Once again, the snake tried to flick Naruto's tiny form off its body. This time, it shook its head rapidly from one side to the next, trying almost desperately to shake Naruto off. Naruto literary had to cling on for dear life, using Chakra infused hands and legs to keep him attached to the snake's slimy scales. Finally getting tired and frustrated at the little worm's persistence, the giant snake decided to ram its own head onto the ground crushing Naruto in the process.

This however, was exactly what Naruto planned for it to do. Seeing as the snake prepared to smash itself into the ground, Naruto

suddenly launched himself off the snake's head and jumped high into the air. The snake, realising Naruto's sudden disappearance from its head, decided to stop its self destructive path, instead, it wanted to complete its mission by swallowing Naruto whole.

/ Oh NO you DON'T! / Naruto thought to himself as he bit his thumb, swiped the blood across his other palm and started quickly performing his own hand seals. "Kuchiyose: Yatai Kuzushi no Jutsu! (Summoning: Food Cart Destroyer!)" Naruto called out as he summoned forth a giant frog with two large swords strapped to its back, suddenly appearing in mid-air. Having such a large and heavy animal suddenly materialised while airborne, gravity automatically take its own course, causing the giant toad to land rather heavily on top of the previous giant snake, literary crushing the life out of the snake. As a result, the snake spit forth some blood from its wide opened mouth before disappearing into a large cloud of smoke, leaving behind Naruto panting slightly above the giant toad.

----- ***(Tsunade and Shizune Vs Kabuto)***

Both Tsunade and Shizune launched themselves at Kabuto at the same time. Tsunade in the forefront, fighting hand-to-hand against him while Shizune stayed back and fire any long distance attacks at him. At first, it just seems like Kabuto was doing his very best to avoid most of Tsunade's attacks, while deflecting or blocking Shizune's attempts at harming him with poison needles and fine razor sharp wires (1).

After almost a minute of wearing the 50-year-old Sannin down by making her waste most of her Chakra smashing the ground or rocks surrounding them, Kabuto decided that now would be a good time to start attacking instead of always defending. Taking a deep breath, Kabuto quickly performed his first hand seals through out the fight. "Chakra no Mesu. (Chakra Scalpel)" Kabuto quietly announced as both his hands started glowing, blue Chakra visibly swirling from his very hands, making them one of the sharpest objects, capable of cutting bones and muscles without even harming the outside skin.

/ This kid... is a medic Ninja! / Tsunade thought to herself while she panted in her old age. */ Only one minute and I'm already out of breath... Damn! I really am getting old! /* Tsunade silently complained to herself.

Shizune, on the other hand, started feeling slightly apprehensive about Tsunade's ongoing fight with Kabuto. It wasn't that she doubted her mistresses' ability, on the contrary, she believed that Tsunade was still the strongest medic Ninja in the world... but still, she just had a feeling that this wasn't going to turn out as she expected.

Once the Chakra no Mesu technique was completed, Kabuto suddenly disappeared, crumbling the rock and ground underneath him in his wake.

"Tsunade-sama! Underground!" Shizune yelled to her mistress as she realised where he had gone.

Tsunade, having come to her own conclusions, quickly jumped upward, barely avoiding Kabuto's Chakra Scalpel hands. Straightening her body in mid-air, Tsunade launched her fist forward, trying to crush Kabuto's face in. Kabuto dodged the fist and quickly jumped to the side, avoiding all the various debris created as Tsunade's fist met the earth once more.

Seeing that the grey haired boy had disappeared, Tsunade kicked off the ground in pursuit of him. From the corner of his eye, Kabuto could make out the form of Tsunade speedily catching up to him. Dropping down onto the ground beside a large rock formation, Kabuto ducked as Tsunade flew over him, kicking a massive hole through the rock formation.

Knowing that she had missed her quarry, though only by a few inches, Tsunade jumped off another rock formation in front of her, performed a summersault in midair and fell backwards towards Kabuto again. However, to her surprise, Kabuto suddenly disappeared from his hiding spot behind the rock and reappeared

behind Tsunade instead. / *FAST!* / was all Tsunade had the time to think before quickly flipping herself over into an upright position. While she was still flipping herself, Kabuto took advantage of her distraction and pressed one of his Chakra Scalpel hands onto her right arm as well as her right thigh, instantly cutting her muscle and bone structure.

Tsunade retaliated once she had landed in her upright position by punching him in the chest (but with much less power than before) using her left fist, forcing him away from her. However, when she tried to stand up again, she realised that he had cut her muscles in the process of the short encounter.

Kabuto smirked nastily. "I've cut your bicep and rectus femoris. You can't use that monstrous strength of yours anymore." He explained in a tone of voice that resembled a teacher talking to a student.

"TSUNADE SAMA!" Shizune yelled, infuriated that Kabuto had dared hurt Tsunade. She launched one of her fine razor wires in his direction by twisting her right hand (which was strapped with a strange black device) around in midair forming the various movements that the wire would follow.

Kabuto dodged and avoided the gleaming wires under the sun while it sliced through the surrounding grasslands and earth, cutting rocks that stood in its path and even managed to slice some of Kabuto's pony tailed hair off. Irritated that his hair was cut, Kabuto raised his Chakra Scalpel hands and quickly cut the wires itself so that it was no longer in the control of Shizune. Having her wires cut so abruptly didn't help Shizune's moods, she launched a few more poison needles in Kabuto's direction but was, once again, either dodged or blocked by the white haired Ninja.

While Kabuto was busy with Shizune and distracted enough to not notice her own actions, Tsunade quickly summoned forth enough Chakra to heal her cut muscles and bones. Within a few seconds, both were movable again, to her great delight. With both limbs able to move, Tsunade quickly launched herself in Kabuto's direction.

Realising Tsunade's presence too late, Kabuto couldn't react fast enough as his neck was snapped suddenly by a powerful thrust from Tsunade. Tsunade followed the attack with another powerful punch to the face, resulting in Kabuto flying quite some distance away before landing haphazardly onto the hard ground and dragging himself for several metres more.

Struggling to his feet, Kabuto suddenly realised that his body wasn't reacting to the way it should be. Another kick from a pissed off Tsunade forced Kabuto several metres further away. At least this time, with Tsunade trying to calm her breathing and catch her breath, Kabuto was given a small time limit to strategise what she had done to his body. */ It's not the muscles... must have been the nerves that she attacked! The electrical signals sent between my brain and the rest of my body are confused, that's why my coordination isn't working properly! SHIT! I need to learn how to move my body NOW! /*

Forcefully calming himself, Kabuto went through step by step all the different signals of movement and what the results are. */ Okay. If I move my hand – my leg moves... if I move my left foot, my right shoulder moves instead... /* However, it seems Tsunade chose that particular moment to regain her strength and started charging towards Kabuto once again. */ Shit! I haven't figured out how to work my whole body yet!! But... I know enough to do this at least! /*

Seeing Tsunade approaching rapidly, Kabuto quickly seized a kunai from his pouch and raised it. Tsunade, watching as he raised the kunai, thought to herself. */ I have to Stop him!! /* She thought firmly. But, just when she had reached his location, Kabuto suddenly slashed his other arm's wrist with his own kunai and swung the arm around, spraying quite a large amount of blood to spill over Tsunade.

Stunned at the sight of blood, all over her body, Tsunade froze in mid fight, and couldn't move a single inch. Seizing the opportunity, Kabuto threw a punch at the woman's face and managed to force her to fly backwards, giving him more space and time to redirect his attention into learning how to move his body.

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune shouted frantically as she managed to catch the woman before she ploughed into the ground. Once stable, Shizune laid the still shaking woman onto the ground and placed her green jacket over her. "Tsunade-sama, please don't overdo things. I am your attendant after all. Let me take care of things sometimes" Shizune replied in a soft but very worried voice.

Using this productive time to his advantage, Kabuto managed to reaffirm to himself exactly what he must do to be able to move his body. */ I have about 80 percent control over my body now; it's enough to let me fight. /* While Shizune continued to fuss over Tsunade a little more, Kabuto used the time to drop another pill into his mouth. This time, it was a 'Blood Replenishment' pill, allowing him to instantly produce a large amount of blood in his body, replenishing the amount he had lost from when he sliced up his own wrist.

Finally satisfied that she could leave Tsunade unattended, Shizune glared angrily at Kabuto. They both stood still for a moment, watching and waiting, before suddenly launching themselves against each other.

Running towards the other, Shizune struck first by flinging a few more poisoned needles in Kabuto's direction, all of which he dodged. Moving in close enough, Kabuto struck Shizune's stomach with his reformed Chakra Scalpel hands, forcing the young woman back in pain. Gritting her teeth in determination, Shizune released a large poisonous cloud of smoke from her mouth. */ Koku Kiri! (Poison Mist) /* Shizune thought as she stood still, now clutching onto her stomach in pain. Once the cloud of purple smoke disappears however, Shizune realised that Kabuto had once again escaped her Jutsu. Two hands suddenly struck upwards from the ground underneath her and grabbed onto her ankles. With the Chakra Scalpel still intact, Kabuto easily cut Shizune's leg tendons, resulting in Shizune collapsing onto her knees due to the weakness among her ankles.

With Shizune slightly incapacitated, Kabuto only found it too easy to render her unconscious with a snap of her neck tendons. Now

focussing all his attentions on the still shivering Tsunade, Kabuto hadn't kept a close enough eye on the rest of his enemies. Which was why the sudden appearance of Naruto beside him had him so surprised.

----- **(Naruto Vs Kabuto)**

Naruto had originally wanted to help Jiraiya since he knew that he was suppose to fight Orochimaru and leave the traitor Kabuto to Tsunade. However, after his fight with the large snake and un-summoning his giant frog, Naruto had just enough time to witness how Kabuto had easily rendered Tsunade unable to battle by spraying his own blood onto the woman. / *Damn! Tsunade's afraid of blood! Shit!* / The blonde boy cursed to himself. Torn between either helping his own sensei with Orochimaru, or fighting to protect the now incapacitated Tsunade from Kabuto, Naruto finally made a decision to help Tsunade and Shizune first. / *Jiraiya can take care of himself... at least... for a while yet.* /

Calling forth the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wrath), Naruto summoned a spiralling funnel of Chakra, being released from the tips of the palms of his hand to midway down his arm. With it, he charged at the seemingly occupied Kabuto. Finding an opening, Naruto slammed his opened palm into Kabuto's side, creating an impact about half the power of a Rasengan, forcing Kabuto to fly the other way before being slammed onto another rock formation.

Watching silently, Naruto calmly analysed the way Kabuto's flesh seems to re-heal himself (since part of his clothes had been torn away from Naruto's attack as well) after the impact of both Naruto's Tenshi no Doki and from the impact of slamming into the rock. Naruto narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Heh. Come to play with me instead, Naruto-kun? It's quite an honour to fight you, the last heir of the Uzumaki clan. Are you going to summon one of your infamous Tenkun no Buki (Weapon of the Heavenly warriors)?" Kabuto sarcastically asked as he regained his breath from the previous panting and popped another soldier pill into

his mouth, knowing that his metabolism was capable of handling multiple soldier pills unlike most Ninjas.

Naruto ignored his question but went straight to the point. "You're a Dokudes... aren't you." It was more a statement than a question.

Shocked silence ensued between the three conscious people upon the battleground. Naruto was quiet as he continued to analyse his adversary, Kabuto was quiet because he was rather surprised that Naruto could have so easily found out about his origins and Tsunade was simply surprised about hearing that name here of all places.

Kabuto gave Naruto a sadistic smile. "Yes. I am. My mother was a Dokudes who was a runaway from the Kuunoki and settled in the Sound instead." Slowly standing to his feet, Kabuto gave Naruto a challenging stare.

Naruto pointed his index finger at Kabuto and stood in a rigid stance. "Yakushi Kabuto. As a member of the Kuunoki village, I, Uzumaki Naruto, have a responsibility to either bring you back to the origin of your mother's birthplace, or to execute you in regards to your mother's crimes. Choose your sentence." Naruto spoke in a monotone voice, as if devoid of emotion.

Kabuto suddenly laughed out loud, as if Naruto had spoken an incredibly funny joke of some sort. The sadistic laugh soon turned into an insane one, frightening both Naruto (though he didn't show it) and the now slightly more conscious-of-her-surroundings Tsunade. "Execute? Are you going to kill me, Naruto-kun? Kill me the way *your* people killed my mother? Just because she left?" Kabuto asked with an insane glint in his eyes.

"She betrayed the ways of the Kuunoki by leaving without permission. Similar to the villages here, she would be considered a Missing Nin, and as such, would have been executed on sight by the Gate Guardians. That is the way it is." Naruto answered succinctly, once again, devoid of all emotion.

Kabuto gave him a sadistic smile again. "That is the way it is, is it?" He quoted from Naruto, the glaring smile never leaving his face, as Naruto slowly dropped his accusing finger. "Tell me... is it 'justice' to imprison your own people behind a wall of indifference and suppressed freedom. The Kuunoki is nothing but a prison, where everyone is born, bred, live, learnt and suppressed like a pack of lambs by seven old goats who refuse to hand over power. Tell me, Naruto-kun. Do you really think that is the 'right' way to go? To kill all those citizens who just wanted a little freedom to do what they want, and not to answer to the greater desires of seven old coots? There is no individualism in the Kuunoki, no freedom. It is nothing but a penitentiary for its own people." Kabuto's smile had slowly disappeared while he talked, leaving behind a determined and very focused expression on his face, as if daring Naruto to contest his argument.

Unable to dispute Kabuto's argument, Naruto remained silent, content to simply watching his adversary. Internally however, Naruto was having a small panic attack. */ I've never... I've never fought against a Dokudes before. Not a half breed or a full breed. This... This will be my first time. I need to remember what they are capable of. Thank god Kaga-san had went through all the histories and specialities of the various clans inside the Hidden Air village before. /*

Thinking back to all the lessons he had learnt under the tutelage of Kaga and his Aunt, Naruto quickly revised over the information he had been given on the Dokudes clan. */ The Dokudes Clan are one of the most powerful Clans in the Kuunoki. They specialise in Medical Ninja Techniques, the use of Various Poisons and Extreme Chakra to molecule control, manipulation and enhancement. Like the Hyuugas, close-hand combat will always work to a Dokudes's advantage because every hit they land on your body will cause you damage. Not because they use Chakra to go against the Inner coil system, but because they can enhance the growth of cancerous cells within your very body and have it eat away your physical being, leaving you permanently crippled! /*

/ Dokudes Ninjas are also very adept at using various poisons, – which, in layman's terms – is literary, anything they can get their hands on. Any material, chemical or substance, a Dokudes has the abilities to change its individual molecular structures into what ever they want, as if they had nano-machines inside their bodies. For example, water can be turned into Hydrogen gas and Oxygen gas molecules, just a small spark will cause a large explosion due to the highly flammable gases in the air, and with the extreme manipulation of air particles, a Dokudes could literary burn their adversary to death without even leaving their post. / (2) Naruto gulped nervously as he continued to remember exactly 'why' the Dokudes Clan were so feared, even among the Kuunoki clansman.

/ However, I don't think that Kabuto would be that adept at Dokudes Techniques. He's got most of the Medic Ninja techniques mastered, but none of the extreme Chakra to molecule control that most other Dokudes members have. I guess I'm lucky that his mother hadn't been able to teach him those yet. / Finished with his analysis for the time being, Naruto got into position to begin the fight that is to come. / Alright, let's get this show on the road. /

Without ever announcing his intention, Naruto suddenly rushed towards the smirking Kabuto. */ Tenshi no Doki! (Angel's wraith) /* Naruto thought to himself as he accurately blocked Kabuto's Chakra Scalpel hands with his own Chakra enhanced Air shield. Deflecting the blow, Naruto then concentrated on making a sharp, invisible spear of Air particles and thrust forward with his other arm. Kabuto, as if having sensed Naruto's assault, decided to retreat underground.

Seeing that Kabuto had disappeared underground, Naruto quickly readied himself for any unexpected attack. As predicted, Kabuto suddenly launched himself out of the ground directly underneath Naruto. Naruto had avoided the Chakra Scalpel hands again by jumping upwards and then decided to slam down his Air particle spear towards Kabuto, whom barely avoided the assault by leaping sideways. The two of them continued in this fashion of attacking

and defending with their various hand based Jutsus, none getting an advantage or at a disadvantage during any point in the fight. They were both equally matched.

/ This child... he's a Dokudes... a half-breed... like Rika-sensei... (3)/ Tsunade thought to herself as the two boys continued to battle each other. */ And yet... he's so strong... only a half-breed... but he's senses and strength exceed even my own in my prime! He's like... he's just like her... A half-breed that was not acknowledged for her skills... /* Tsunade suddenly remembered how the rest of the Air villagers had treated her sensei during her stay in the Kuunoki village. Due to the fact that Rika was under house arrest for the rest of her life, she hadn't even been allowed to walk into the streets of the Kuunoki, and when Tsunade did have the opportunity to talk to people outside of the palace, most of the villagers had looked down upon her sensei's amazing abilities as a mutation due to her half breed status. */ Their treatment of her was so cruel... /*

For some unknown reason, Tsunade unexpectedly remembered part of what Rika had once told her, it was one of the last things Rika had ever told Tsunade as a teacher as well as a friend.

(FLASHBACK)

" Follow your own path, have faith in yourself, and define a new way to live... For you are stronger than I am... and as such... I want you to surpass me..."

(END FLASHBACK)

/ Surpass you... Rika-sensei... / Truth be told, Tsunade had never really understood what her teacher had meant when she said that. At first, she had thought it meant that Rika didn't want her to make the same mistakes as her late sensei, and in a sense, would automatically represent the fact that Tsunade had surpassed her in achievement. However, through out the waring years, Tsunade then interpreted it in the sense that she must surpass her sensei in 'ability'

– that was one of the reasons why Tsunade had dedicated the rest of her life to Medical Ninja techniques. If that were what Rika had meant when she first stated it, then Tsunade would have already achieved that status. It is true; ability wise - Tsunade had surpassed her teacher.

/ If I've already done it, then why does my heart still feel so heavy? Why do I still feel like a student instead of a full-fledged master? Why do I feel like I've missed so much of what she meant? WHAT HAVE I MISSED?! / Tsunade thought to herself forlornly.

Shaking herself out of her memories, Tsunade looked over at Shizune's bloodied form. Suddenly, images of Dan and Nawaki's death invaded her mind, making her shake even more due to her heartache. */ How many more people must I lose? /* She asked herself truthfully. */ I wasn't able to save Dan even with my supposedly amazing abilities. I wasn't even there to see Nawaki's final fall. And there was absolutely nothing I could have done to stop Rika's demise. What use am I if I can't even protect those people precious to me? How weak a Ninja can I be, if I give up now? I have to... have to surpass Rika. That was what she said. Surpass her in every way. To be able to hold on to the things that are precious to you, to be able to fight and win against a seemingly impossible enemy. She failed in holding on to her husband and she failed in winning the battle against the Councillor's ruling. I... I won't follow her path. I won't follow her mistakes. I won't give up on life. I won't... I won't let go of my dreams, my memories of those precious to me... I won't fail like she had... /* Finally understanding the difference between her sensei and herself, Tsunade then thought about what she had done in the past to reconcile the difference between herself and Rika.

/ What have I been doing all this time?! Running away... / Tsunade finally realized part of her problem. She didn't have faith in herself **not** to make the same mistakes her sensei had made. It was simply too hard to fight against destiny and fate, especially with regards to her life and her loved one's demise. It had hurt her too much to

remember her beloved brother and lover, and so, she had run away from her home, their dreams, the dream to become Hokage. Blindingly, she had blamed everything on that dream, on that wish to protect others instead of saving their own lives first and foremost. After all, a coward would always runaway from the fight and as such, would survive longer.

(FLASHBACK)

" Do you want to die?" Tsunade asked in an irritated voice. "Nawaki. You're still a genin so just runaway from the enemy on the battlefield." She simply explained.

" DON'T TELL A MAN TO RUN!" Nawaki yelled at his sister, angry that she could ever tell him to runaway from a fight.

(END FLASHBACK)

The fond memories of Nawaki's childish courage were juxtaposed against the image of his corpse, covered by a white sheet.

I Nawaki... Dan... You were both so much stronger than I am... So much stronger than Rika too... for she too, forsaken her own daughter to be with her love... instead of choosing life and to continue on with the hardship. I may not have chosen suicide... but my self-imposed exile is not much better either. I've been such a fool! But I promise... I promise that from now on I won't runaway. I won't runaway from my responsibilities. I won't runaway from Konoha. And I won't runaway from my destiny. I swear to you, Rika, I will find a way to surpass you! I'll make you proud! I Tsunade made this personal promise to herself.

Clearing her mind of all thoughts, she then forcefully calmed her body's reaction to the sight of blood, until finally, she stopped shaking completely. It was hard, much harder than she had expected it would be. All it took was the understanding that she had to let her loved ones go, had to accept the fact that they were dead and beyond her reach. Most of all, it hurt her to admit that she couldn't do

anything to bring them back. And finally, what she really needed to overcome her hemophobia – the most important thing – is to believe in herself and to have someone or something to protect. Someone important – like Shizune; someplace important – like Konoha; an important ideal – Naruto's faith and philosophies; all of which gathered together to help her overcome her own weakness. Eyes now opened, Tsunade understood her role. It was her fight against Kabuto as it had always been. She won't back down and she won't runaway anymore. It's time to show the world that Tsunade was still one of the Legendary Sannin.

Growing tired from the constant use of the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's wrath) as well as the continued focussed concentration needed to activate the technique, Naruto was starting to find himself both mentally and physically drained. And due to the impending exhaustion, he was also slipping and getting more injured as time prolongs while Kabuto continued on with the same pace he had begun with. */ Shit! I can't keep going at this pace. Damn it! Even after all those training, I'm still not able to use the Tenshi no Doki continuously!* / Naruto thought to himself, mentally berating himself for such a weakness. Even though he had been warned by his Aunt when they first starting learning this technique, that it would take him a few years to perfectly master it, Naruto still pushed himself constantly to better improve his ability, hating himself if he wasn't able to achieve perfection.

All of a sudden, both combatants were brought to a halt when the commanding voice of Tsunade was suddenly heard from the sidelines. They both turned at the same time to address her and was rather surprised to see her (still covered in blood) but standing rather confidently on the ground, instead of the shivering and shaking form that they had last seen her in.

"Oi! Naruto! Step down. This is my fight!" Tsunade growled out at the boy and all Naruto could do was lift his eyebrow in surprise.

Though he didn't say anything, Naruto was quite glad that someone else could step up to fight Kabuto. He knew that with his current level of skill (coupled with the fact that he couldn't summon the Tenkun no bukis or have the time to summon any of his helpers), he probably was slightly weaker than Kabuto. And he still didn't want to rely too much on Kyuubi's powers just yet, so a small break was thoroughly welcomed. Nodding in acknowledgement, Naruto stepped back out of the fray as Tsunade suddenly launched herself at Kabuto.

Kabuto managed to dodge the punch she was aiming at him but was surprised by it being a decoy for Tsunade immediately dropped her body downwards and followed up by swiping his feet with her own. Kabuto avoided the swipe by performing a back flip but he underestimated how fast Tsunade could recover. She instantly jumped off her feet to launch a kick at his face just as he landed on his feet. Bending backwards, Kabuto avoided the blow again as Tsunade flew over him. However, to Kabuto's constant surprise, Tsunade managed to twist herself in mid air just as she was leaping over him. With her own Chakra enhanced hands, she managed to slam her palm directly onto his stomach, forcing him to fall backwards onto the ground painfully while she continued with her twist before landing on her leg firmly.

Clutching his stomach in pain, Kabuto tried to manoeuvre enough of his own Chakra into the area to heal all the damage Tsunade's blow had done to him. As he was concentrating on healing himself, all he could do was try his best to dodge Tsunade's blow after blow. Unlike the first time they had fought, she was no longer relying on her rage and anger to fuel her power. In fact, Tsunade held a façade of calm confidence on her face, not even breathing heavily as launched attack after attack, some of which Kabuto didn't even recognise though he knew that they were probably lethal nonetheless.

Jumping, twisting, attacking and blocking, Tsunade continued on her pursuit of inflicting as much damage as possible to Kabuto's Dokudes enhanced body. As more time went by, the more success Tsunade gained in her attempt. However, all things good had to

come to an end and it was to her disappointment that Kabuto suddenly turning away and ran from the fight. She had almost lost her temper when the boy dodge another of her blows before disappearing under the ground as he so prefers, but then when she had waited for him to reappear, he reappeared some distance away, only to run towards the direction of Orochimaru instead of her. Twitching in slight anger, Tsunade ran after him, ignoring the shouts of a re-awakened Shizune as she called the Sennin to 'be careful.'

After leaving Kabuto to Tsunade, Naruto immediately ran towards the location where he knew his sensei and Orochimaru were battling it out. It had been close to half an hour since the entire fiasco between Tsunade and Orochimaru had started, and he knew that it wouldn't be long before Jiraiya finally regain his full strength back. But until that time, Jiraiya was still weak. However, due to the fact that Orochimaru can't use his hands to perform any Jutsus either, they were lucky that it had become an even match between two people who can't or weren't very successful at using Jutsus, if at all.

Arriving at his destination, Naruto quickly launched himself at his enemy. Calling forth the Tenshi no Doki, Naruto dived at Orochimaru, wanting to strike the snake-like man with his swirling wind spear, of which, Orochimaru quickly sidesteps and jumps away. Following in Orochimaru's lead, Naruto continued his assault, slashing almost randomly at the constantly jumping and dodging Orochimaru. When Naruto finally got lucky and landed a slash right across Orochimaru's abdomen, he was rendered slightly shocked when the opponent in front of him suddenly melted into a pile of dried up material. / *SNAKE SKIN!?* / (4) Naruto thought to himself in realisation. Unfortunately for him, Orochimaru had already snuck behind the boy.

Releasing his irritably long tongue, Orochimaru wrapped it firmly around Naruto's ankle before pulling harshly, flinging the boy off his feet and into the air. Rotating the blonde haired boy around in mid air at speeds that Naruto could not counter at all. And all of a sudden, Orochimaru released his momentum. But if Naruto thought that it

was finally over, he was very wrong. Still dizzy due to the abrupt whirling of his body around in circles, Naruto didn't notice until too late that that ground was becoming closer and closer to his face. Orochimaru then smashed Naruto's body deep into the hardened ground, rendering the boy instantly unconscious. / *Finally! I'll take my revenge on that DAMN KYUUBI BRAT!* / Orochimaru thought to himself gleefully as he watched the boy's eyes fall backwards and then close his eyelids.

"Naruto!" Jiraiya yelled in shock as he watched his student being crushed onto the impact of the ground by Orochimaru's tongue. His stunted anxiety immediately left him however when he noticed that Orochimaru had called forth the Kusanagi (Grass Cutter) sword from his mouth again. Jumping off the snake, Orochimaru followed the angle of his tongue, rapidly closing in on the unconscious prey that he had set his eyes on. / *SHIT! He's going after Naruto!* / Jiraiya frantically thought to himself as he too, jumped off the giant useless snake to follow Orochimaru, even while he completed his own hand seals. / *This better work!* / He thought anxiously before quickly launching his defence.

"Doton: Tsuchi Kawarimi no Jutsu! (Earth Element: Earth Substitution Technique) (5)" Jiraiya muttered to himself as he quickly buried the real Naruto deep underground and yet replacing him with an identical substitute that was made of earth instead. It was a quick escape technique that is not very common to the Ninja world, as it is more of an Earth jutsu, therefore only used by Stone Ninjas. However, due to Jiraiya's constant travels around the world, he and Naruto had learnt of this unique and often very helpful technique.

Not knowing that his prey had been replaced, Orochimaru gleefully slammed his sword directly into and through the chest of the blonde boy in front of him. However, when he saw that the boy was not instantly bleeding from the severe wound, choking on his own blood, or no bodily reactions at all; Orochimaru realised that something was very wrong. Pulling the Kusanagi (Grass Cutter) sword out of the stiff and almost wooden boy, Orochimaru watched, disgusted, as the

previous blonde boy suddenly turned to dust and flew away with the wind.

Turning around and snaring at his hateful rival, who had just managed to land on his foot lightly, the two glared at each other just as they have had so many times before. "How dare you?! Do you have any idea how long I've waited to gut that boy!? The one and only chance to kill off the Uzumaki once and for all, and **YOU** just had to stand in my way!!" Orochimaru growled at Jiraiya, who opted not to answer.

Cracking his knuckles as a show of defiance, Jiraiya calmly scorned his ex-comrade turned traitor, attacking the snake-like man's weakness directly. "Now. The poison that Tsunade had fed into my bloodstreams is finally gone. Shall we start this fight again." He asked in a very threatening manner.

Orochimaru gritted his teeth in anger. */ Shit! Beaten by this toad summoning idiot!? NOT LIKELY!! But... damn it! I wish I could use my Jutsus. F##K that old man! I wished he'd rot in hell for what he did to my arms!!* / Orochimaru silently cursed, trembling slightly in fear of fighting his rival without the use of his arms and hands. Suddenly, his attention was diverted to somewhere else - someone was calling for him.

"Orochimaru-sama!" Kabuto yelled at his master. Knowing what his most trusted right hand man wanted him to do, Orochimaru quickly jumped towards Kabuto's location. There, Kabuto quickly pulled Orochimaru's sleeve up again, swiped another strip of his own blood onto Orochimaru's tattoo before slamming it down onto the ground.

From some distance away, Tsunade had watched Kabuto drew his master's sleeve up. Then and there, she knew what they were up to and had proceeded to follow with her own attack. Swiping some of her own blood onto the back of her wrist, she quickly slammed her own hand onto the ground.

Jiraiya, having made sure that Naruto had re-emerged somewhere near the re-awakened Shizune, quickly launched himself into the fray of battle once again. Finally having full control over his own Chakra back, Jiraiya quickly finished up his set of hand seals before also slamming his opened palm onto the ground.

Among the legendary three sannin, three loud shouts rang through the area as clear as the day. "KUCHIYOSE NO JUTSU! (SUMMONING NO JUTSU!)"

Instantly, a huge cloud of smoke covered the entire area. As the smoke slowly cleared, a monstrous sight has also been revealed. There was a giant purple striped snake with four massive scaled horns on its head with eyes that gleamed dangerously at the others, almost daring them to challenge him. There was a giant red-orangey toad wearing an opened jacket of sorts, holding a short sword and a long pipe held in its wide mouth. And last but not least, there was a giant slug, mainly white in colour with stripes of blue running down from head to end, and two antennae or eyes that watches its other opponents silently.

" Manda and Orochimaru. Katsuya and Tsunade... Long time no see... What is this? Planning some kind of reunion, eh? Jiraiya?" Gamabunta snorted as he lifted the pipe out of his mouth.

"Hardly. Now's not a good time to crack jokes, Gama!" Jiraiya chided as he tensed in anticipation of the fight, still standing on top of Gamabunta's head. "We're about to eliminate our common enemy, Orochimaru, once and for all."

Orochimaru remained silent at the challenge, but Manda seemed to glare angrily at the man on top of its head. **"Oi! Orochimaru. What the hell were you thinking summoning me here for such a troublesome fight on some pathetic piece of land?! Want me to rip you apart, huh?!"** Manda threatened.

Just when Kabuto was about to try and negotiate between the temperamental serpent and his master, knowing that it was a major gamble to summon Manda in the first place; Orochimaru suddenly interrupted the snake's threats. "Ch." He hissed in irritation. "Shut up, Manda. And keep your eyes on your opponents. I'll give you sacrifices AFTER you're done with those two." Ignoring the giant snake's indignant look, Orochimaru shifted his attention to Tsunade and Katsuya instead, knowing that if he spent any more time arguing with Manda, the snake might become suspicious of his ability to perform Ninjutsu and then all hell would break loose.

"Tsunade." Orochimaru called as he looked directly into her determined face. "We are not enemies. Why are you fighting in this battle?" He asked succinctly.

Tsunade gave him a confident smirk instead. "Because I want to protect Konoha." She replied tersely.

"WHY?" Orochimaru asked again, emphasising that one word with all his might.

Tsunade lifted an eyebrow in challenge. "Because from today forth, I'm the fifth Hokage of Konohagakure no Sato. And as such, I will gamble my life for the safety of the village."

Orochimaru narrowed his eyes in realisation. Now, he understood Tsunade's decision in full, and he was not very happy with the end results. "So be it. Today is the last time that there will be three of the Legendary Leaf Nins!" He declared in a harsh and angry tone of voice.

Immediately, all three massive creatures launched into the fray. Katsuya started off by spitting out deadly acids at her snake opponent – Zeshi Nensan (Thousand Fanged Acid). Manda swirled its body around and managed to dodge the incoming acid, of which managed to melt several large boulders into the ground due to its contaminated acidity. Suddenly, Katsuya found itself being entwined by Manda's massive body and tail, being crushed slowly and

painfully while Manda's large mouth suddenly opened to its maximum stretch capability, ready to swallow Katsuya and Tsunade (who was standing on top of Katsuya) whole.

Suddenly, Gamabunta jumped into action, stopping Manda's assault by swiping his short sword towards Manda's opened mouth instead. Seeing the incoming weapon, Manda quickly slammed its mouth shut onto the weapon, twisting, thrusting forward and forcing Gamabunta to jump away to avoid any more impact. However, Manda continued to try and squeeze Katsuya to death. This move backfired however, when Katsuya suddenly split herself into millions of smaller versions of herself, able to escape the clutches of Manda, to regather themselves someplace away and reform her original size and shape. Manda then spit the short sword that was still kept in its mouth directly towards Gamabunta, who barely managed to dodge his own sword.

"Bunta! Give me some oil!" Jiraiya yelled the order, and Gamabunta followed up with a confirmed grunt. Breathing in deeply, Gamabunta suddenly spit out large gallons of raw oil. Jiraiya, having just completed his own set of seals, firmly released his technique in conjunction with the oil being spread. / *KATON! GAMA YUENDAN!* (*Fire element: Toad Oil Cannon!*) / The first spark formed by Jiraiya ignited all the oil being spit out of Gamabunta's mouth. The two combined to create a giant combusting explosion that burnt up almost the entire battle field. Luckily, Katsuya had been far away enough to avoid all the flames.

Watching tensely as the fires created slowly died down, and the wind moved most of the smoke clouds away, Jiraiya suddenly narrowed his eyes at the pale, melting corpse of a snake crumbling from the centre of the burnt field. / *Shit! It's the skin moulting technique!* / Jiraiya realised too late that the crumbling form was none other than Manda's snake skin and nothing more.

Before he could do anything else, a large entity suddenly sprung up from under the ground directly in front of Gamabunta. Thinking that it was Manda's head, Gamabunta quickly grabbed onto the twisting

being and halted its movements. However, they instantly noticed (though still too late) that what Gamabunta was actually holding was none other than Manda's tail. / *DAMN! WHERE'S THE HEAD?! /* Jiraiya thought frantically to himself when another loud sound behind him directed his attention elsewhere. That was when he realised that Manda had resurfaced from underground, this time, right behind Gamabunta and was already in the process of opening its wide mouth to swallow them whole.

Coming to their rescue however, was Tsunade, holding onto Gamabunta's short sword (though rather large in comparison to Tsunade's own size). She quickly plunged the short sword onto Manda's mouth, shutting it close by piercing through both ends of the snake's jaws, and then slamming all three onto the ground, stabbing deeply into the earth, rendering Manda unable to move further. "AND KEEP IT SHUT!" Tsunade demanded angrily at the monstrous snake.

Feeling triumphant knowing that Tsunade had caught Manda in surprise, she didn't notice that Manda's gigantic tail had somehow found a way to escape the grip of Gamabunta and is currently heading towards her direction. Suddenly, Tsunade was hit from behind by Manda's giant tail. The heavy blow to her backside and head launched her immediately off the Gamabunta's short sword to fall directly onto the ground.

"TSUNADE!!!!" Jiraiya yelled in concern while far in the distance, Shizune too, called out in alarm. "Tsunade-sama!"

Having seen the tail's slippery escape, Gamabunta huffed in irritation. Jumping high into the air, both he and Jiraiya managed to land right on top of the still twisting tail, causing Manda to feel such pain that it roared its agony through gritted teeth.

Still panting in throbbing pain at having his tail literary sat on by a giant toad, resulting in it being unable to be moved, Manda glared upwards at his 'supposed' master with hate in its eyes. **"GRRRR... HOW DARE YOU SHAME ME LIKE THIS!? I'D RIP YOU TO**

PIECES... BUT WITH A WHOLE IN MY MOUTH, I CAN'T EVEN SWALLOW!! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT, OROCHIMARU!!!!"

Manda roared fiercely at Orochimaru. However, for his troubles, the snake didn't even elicit a twitch from the snake Sannin. Some distance away from it though, Tsunade began to stir from her place on the ground.

"Ug.." Blinking her eyes until the fuzziness disappeared, Tsunade slowly pulled herself up onto her feet. Finally taking notice of Manda's current predicament, she focused and glared at the giant snake with all her rage. "You'll PAY FOR THAT! YOU BLOODY SNAKE!!!" She roared in anger and rushed forward at the still incapacitated snake.

Raising her fist, fully powered by her own destructive Chakra, Tsunade slammed it right into the side of Manda's huge face. The powerful punch forced shockwaves of pain to throb all the way from Manda's head to his tail and back again. The agony of strike rendered the snake unable to talk and soon enough, Manda decided that staying here just wasn't an option any more and so, he decided to escape back to where he had came.

A loud 'boom' erupted as Manda suddenly disappeared into a massive cloud of smoke. When the smoke finally cleared enough for Jiraiya and Tsunade to see what was going on, they weren't surprised to find Kabuto and Orochimaru standing firmly on the ground, as if unperturbed that their greatest ally – the king of all snakes – Manda had abandoned them to their fates.

"Now, it's just you two against us!" Jiraiya taunted confidently, tensing his muscles to be ready for any strike.

To Jiraiya's surprise however, Orochimaru only smirked in response. "Maybe another time, Jiraiya, Tsunade. I still have other business I must attend to, so if you don't mind, I'll bid you farewell for now." With that said and done, he slowly melted into the ground underneath him until none of his body can be seen, and Kabuto didn't wait long either, disappearing into a cloud of smoke.

"SHIT!!!!" Tsunade yelled at the top of her lungs, completely frustrated that the bastard had somehow escaped her again. However, her temper was abruptly halted when Jiraiya landed a firm pat on her shoulder, commiserating with her that they had both only come out as a draw with Orochimaru.

Feeling her anger slowly recede, Tsunade took some time to survey the battlefield. There were huge holes dispersed around the area with many of its original rock formations crumbled to the ground. Trees were uprooted and blasted debris everywhere. Overall however, it seems the environment had survived a full on assault by all three Legendary Sannin.

Shifting her gaze now onto the unconscious form of Naruto, Tsunade delicately looked over the boy's few injuries and bruises. She was confident that by tomorrow morning, the boy would have already healed himself completely. And so, didn't really bother to go and check over the boy's injuries out herself. After all, he is an Uzumaki. And if there was one thing that Tsunade knew about the Uzumakis, it was that they are all very tough survivors.

The next morning, Naruto woke up with a slight headache, but nothing so bad that he couldn't live without complaining. Shifting slightly onto his sides instead of his back, Naruto gently flexed some of muscles, making sure they've all been healed properly and are not sore from the fight.

"So, you're finally awake. Huh?" Tsunade's distinctive voice cut through Naruto's slowly emerging consciousness.

Blinking his eyes open, Naruto focused his gaze at the blond haired woman sitting in an armchair beside his bed. After a moment's thought, Naruto gave her a cheesy smile in response, assuming that since he was still alive and healing, that they had won against Orochimaru. "Is the bastard dead?" He asked in a tired and yet determined way.

Tsunade returned the question with a heavy sigh and shaking her head slightly despairingly. "No... he escaped." Not really understanding why he felt so ashamed at letting her former teammate, Tsunade nonetheless couldn't help but feel as if she had betrayed Naruto in some way, as if her failure was a sign of disappointing the Uzumaki boy. But to her surprise, Naruto only shrugged in response.

"That's okay. There'll always be next time." Naruto answered her calmly and then shifted his gaze to the birds flying outside of his window.

Slightly perturbed by his seeming detachment to the situation at hand, Tsunade was very curious and so, decided to ask him why he took the news in such a calm manner. "Aren't you angry that he got away at all? I thought you were gonna throw a tantrum or something." She admitted while giving off a crooked smile.

Naruto looked back at her with his own crooked smile. "Yeah, I'm disappointed that he got away, but... we're all alive and that's what is most important. And anyway, there'll always be next time to get him." He answered back confidently.

Lifting her eyebrow in a strange gesture, Tsunade inquired sarcastically. "Are you so sure that there will *be* a **next** time?" As Naruto nodded his head as a sign of his certainty, Tsunade continued her interrogation. "And how *do* you know that there will be next time? Have you already been able to see the future using the Uzumaki bloodline ability?"

Naruto gave her a confident smirk. "I don't need to use my bloodline limit ability to look into the future. I already know it." He stated in certainty.

"Oh, and what's the future going to be like for you, then? Are you going to become some great Uzumaki leader, the greatest of the Prophet house? Come on tell me!" Tsunade encouraged, wanting to know what made Naruto really 'tick'.

"No... I'm going to become the best Hokage of Konoha." Naruto answered serenely, as if he really could tell the future.

Shocked into silence at his answer, Tsunade took some time to gather herself after the storm of emotions thundered into her heart at the boy's proclamation. "How? ... Why? ..." Though trying to articulate her thoughts, Tsunade seemed to be unable to achieve the results she wanted.

As if able to read her mind, Naruto instantly supplied the right answers. "Because I believe that the future isn't written yet. I believe that the future is what I make it to be. And as such, I want to become Hokage. Because to become the Hokage... is my dream..."

(FLASHBACK)

" *To become Hokage is my dream!*"

(END FLASHBACK)

Both Dan and Nawaki proclaimed this very same message to Tsunade. The famous healer of Konohagakure had to wipe some stray tears from her eyes before she finally settled back into her original state of mind.

Looking back at Naruto's confident and smiling visage, even though the boy was still healing from the previous day's fight, Tsunade came to a decision. *I Just this once... One more time... Nawaki... Dan... Let me help in making someone's dream come true... That's what I've always wanted. To help you achieve your dreams... To stand by you and cheer for you when you realise that you've finally done it... You've finally become the great, the powerful, and the honoured... Hokage. Let this boy be my chance at redemption, my one chance at fulfilling my own dream. From this day forth, not only am I the fifth Hokage of Konohagakure no Sato, but I will also work my way diligently to help Naruto achieve his dream. Please. Just this once... let me succeed. I*

While thinking through these thoughts, Tsunade unconsciously lifted her precious necklace up and over her head. Slowly, she pulled the delicate string over Naruto's own blonde head and settled the gem firmly onto his shirt. Then, tipping the boy's chin with her right hand's fingers, she gave the Uzumaki heir a small but memorable kiss on his forehead. Finally settling back onto her seat and gazing adoringly at the shocked face of Naruto, Tsunade gave him a wide grin. "Grow up to be a good man, Naruto. And I promise you. I will do all I can to grant you your wish, your dream"

Slowly, Naruto's own dazed eyes cleared, and his own mouth split into a wide grin itself. "It's a promise, Tsunade-baachan!" He cheered.

(1) Original attack for Shizune. She uses something similar to fishing wires that wraps around something and cuts straight through it. I think it was also called a garrote wire or something like that. Heh. I just wanted to make her a bit stronger than she is in the manga. XD

(2) Example is inspired by the character Roy Mustang's ability (the Flame Alchemist) from the anime/manga series of Full Metal Alchemist .

(3) When I say 'half breed', I mean that both his and her parents aren't from the same clan. Rika is the daughter of a Dokudes mother and an Uzumaki father; I've just given Kabuto a Dokudes mother as well. Naruto, technically, is also a half breed Uzumaki, but then again, no one ever calls a Uzumaki 'half breed' because their blood just doesn't dilute no matter how many of their ancestors share their blood with other families.

(4) Snake Skin. Remember how when Anko tried to kill Orochimaru in the Forest of death, and all she got was a snake skin. Okay, let's just assume that he has that ability automatically and it is NOT a jutsu that has to be performed by the hand. After all, during that period with Anko, I didn't see him perform any seals either. So yeah,

that's the basis for this... skill that Orochimaru can perform without needing seals.

(5) Exactly like Kowarimi no Jutsu (either using blocks of wood or mud). The only difference being that this Kowarimi no Jutsu can be performed by someone else other than the person being switched. Original Jutsu.

Okay people! Big NEWS: I'm going to be off on Holiday from 30th November until the 3rd of January. This means that I'll only have a very old computer as my companion and VERY limited internet access as a whole. Basically, what this boils down to is that **'I WILL NOT BE UPLOADING ANY NEW CHAPTER IN BETWEEN THOSE TIMES!!'**

I give you all my apologies for the inconvenience but I promise that I will NOT give up on this fic. When I am back, I will be back with a vengeance (hopefully) so there will be chapters coming, but only after this LONG Christmas break for me. Please don't cram all my review space with protests or complaints about the wait, I will be leaving and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

So other than that, please go to my website (link is on my profile's page) because I have new SPOILER information on the Uzumaki line and the Dokudes Family uploaded there – for those who are interested.

OH! An important note for you guys to know: The next few chapters **WILL NOT BE ABOUT NARUTO** . In fact, I don't think we'll be seeing Naruto for at least the next 3 chapters or more.

Pursuit I

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After the Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter 4: Pursuit I

" **Demon's talk**" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

"---" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Warning: Naruto OOC, PG-13. I'm back! No, I'm not dead; I really am alive. And here is the next chapter, though late, it is FINALLY here. Hope you all enjoy it and DON'T kill me for the incredibly late update because then, no one will be able to finish this story.

As for this chapter, there really isn't anything here that I need to warn you about, only some spoiler warnings for Episode 112 of the Naruto anime. Well, I did try to change as much of the plot as I can while still maintaining the original story. Hope you all like the changes.

Chapter 4

Sasuke grunted one last time as he threw the photo frame against his bedroom's sidewall, resulting in the shattering of the glass and the breaking of the wooden frame itself, all landing haphazardly onto the polished wooden floor.

Slowly, as if in a trance, the last remaining Uchiha of Konoha stepped towards the item that he had so easily smashed to pieces

before. Kneeling on one knee, he delicately brush away the litter of glass fragments with his hand, followed by him picking up the now freed photograph before standing back up straight and gazing impassively at the image presented. In silence, he continued to stare at the frozen image that was no longer protected by its vulnerable frame. The photograph itself was none other than team seven's official photo as registered in the Ninja registries of Konoha.

In it, he recognised himself, standing in a straight, stiff and almost arrogant manner, as if challenging anyone worthy enough to take him on. He was so young then... So young and so naïve. */ I use to think nothing could touch me. As if I was invincible. And all I needed to do was try harder, then I'll become strong enough to defeat HIM. And then, everything will be complete... I was such an idiot... /* Sasuke sneered at his younger self, acting all self-important when he had no idea how big the real world is, and how dangerous it could be.

Sasuke shifted his angry gaze to the middle figure in the image - a childish, grinning face met his gaze. Sakura was grinning with all her might, blushing slightly at having accomplished the first step of her dream to get close to the reclusive Uchiha.

Sakura had always been such a burden to the team. She had always been the useless one. Though smart, she wasn't very strong, and as such, often stayed by the sidelines and watched everyone else finish the job that she was also suppose to help with. */ But she's not weak anymore, is she? /* Sasuke reminded himself that it was Sakura who successfully fended off the Sound team during the second Chuunin Exam, while Sasuke and Naruto slept through most of the fight. It was Sakura who had shown enough courage to go back and rescue Naruto from the clutches of Orochimaru, while he, himself, was the coward of the group, wanting to flee from the monster under his bed. */She even made it to the final Chuunin exam... and she won her match while I... I didn't even... I didn't even win mine... /* He thought to himself with remorse.

Finally, Sasuke shifted his gaze leftwards, towards the third member of team seven, and was immediately assaulted by flashes of painful memory.

(FLASHBACK)

" NO YOU CAN'T!!! Admit it! Sasuke! You're already at your limit's end! There's no way you can continue fighting. Just get out of here before you become a burden to ME!"

(END FLASHBACK)

Sasuke gritted his teeth in anger as the memory of his fruitless fight against Gaara replayed again at the back of his mind, followed by Naruto's angry refute of his abilities. He admitted that he had become weakened at the time of the fight, but Naruto had no right to accuse him of being such a burden. */ He had no RIGHT!//*

Many other fragments of memory flashed through his mind, all of them showing times when Naruto had to involuntarily save both himself and Sakura. First, there was the fight against Zabuza when Naruto had so easily broke through the ex-Mist ninja's guard and prevented him from continuing to entrap Kakashi. Next, was the fight against Haku - Sasuke was literary on the blink of death, when Naruto, the *Hero* of their group, suddenly turns up, wields a weapon of the gods and beats the shit out of all their opponents.

There was so many fragments, pieces of time, slices of memory, all showing Naruto's greatness and silently comparing them to Sasuke's own mistakes and downfalls. Simply put, he was weaker than Naruto, both physically and mentally. He knew that, he admitted it. But he didn't know how to overcome that dilemma. And that was the problem.

After spending a whole month, and some more, training himself non-stop, he still found himself incomparable to Naruto's strength. There was just no comparison at all. What was the point? Why had he tried so hard to begin with? Why bother when all your efforts doesn't

seem to make an inch of difference. Depression and anger ate away at Sasuke's soul, continuously asking questions but not finding any answers. He had simply forgotten what his purpose had been, all he had was the goal to defeat Naruto, but for what reason, it had slipped his mind. And then... he met Itachi again...

Accidentally finding Itachi, seeing him beat up Kakashi and the other Jounins so easily as well as how easily Itachi had beaten himself; the entire incident re-sparked Sasuke's memories. It brought back the meaning of his life; it brought back the reason of why he wanted to become strong in the first place. And it shattered his perceptions on reality.

Gripping tightly onto the photograph of lost dreams, he reflected that he had finally awoken to reality. He had lost the illusions of peace, happiness, unity and family; instead, he had woken up to hell. Sasuke silently dropped the slightly crumpled image onto the floor, before turning his back on his room and stepping determinately through the doors of fate and destiny, never turning back.

The doors shut with a resounding resonance of finality.

Sneaking away from the ninjas guarding the Konoha gates were easy when you know of the single weakness in and among the large wooden walls surrounding the hidden village. And Sasuke was one of the few who did know of this weakness's location. Long ago, while still in the Ninja academy, Sasuke had accidentally discovered the location of a small crack in between two of these huge logs that made up the village walls, it was hidden behind a large bush and so, not many had found out about its existence. He had, at the time, secretly followed a few of the outcast students from his class after they had sneaked out from their academic lessons, intending to go outside of the village walls to play. Since then, Sasuke had often escaped through the gap himself, just to leave behind the hustle and bustle of village life. And now, this would be the last time he would ever sneak away from this village again.

Upon finding himself finally outside of the village walls, Sasuke had to take extra care NOT to be found by the patrolling guards that surrounded the near by forests of Konoha. He had been very lucky to come this far and any single mistake now could cost him more than he could afford.

After almost half an hour's walk in the direction of the Sound, Sasuke suddenly tensed as he felt eyes prying and watching him from several different angles. Tensing his muscles further and cursing himself mentally for being found out so soon, Sasuke readied himself for a fight that would literary decide his fate from now on. "Come out, all of you. I know you're there!" He yelled gruffly, angry with his opponents and himself.

However, to his complete astonishment, the four Shinobis that finally revealed themselves weren't Konoha Shinobis at all. Sasuke stiffened in shock and silent confusion as he glared nervously at the four Sound guards that had protected Orochimaru as he fought against the Hokage. Sasuke had only just recognised the four from their individual appearance, due to the fact that none of them were exactly wearing a 'Sound' head protector. "What do you all want?" Tightening his fist in readiness, Sasuke ground out his question while his eyes darted quickly from one to the other, making sure that none of them made any threatening moves.

The four Sound Shinobis looked among each other first, as if questioning their own luck upon this event, before one of them finally took a non-threatening step forward.

Sakon, the one with the two heads, did a slight bow towards Sasuke before quickly bringing himself upright before stating his question. "Sasuke-sama I presume?"

Sasuke narrowed his eyes. "Who are you and how do you know my name?"

"My name is Sakon, leader of the Sound Four. My comrades and I were summoned by Orochimaru-sama himself to come and invite

you, Sasuke-sama, to join us in our glory and attain the power you greatly desires." Sakon smirked as he gave the boy a summary of their purpose for coming to Konoha.

Sasuke's eyes continue to stay narrowed in suspicion. "How do I know you're telling the truth?" He grunted in a threatening manner.

"You'll just have to trust us." Sakon continued to give him a sardonic smirk.

Gritting his teeth in annoyance, Sasuke was irritated enough to think about going back on his decision. "And if I refuse?"

Sakon's smirk widen into a slightly insane grin. Without actually answering the boy's question with a threat, he continued on with his explanations. "We were sent to give you a message. 'If you stay in this Sh#tty village, you'll always be weak like everyone else. You'll never become powerful... Playing family games with your comrades will only make you rot! Don't forget your purpose. This village will only become shackles that bind you. It's best to just cut those worthless connections. In doing so, you'll be able to obtain much greater power.' That was Orochimaru-sama's message to you."

There was a low rumbling growl emitting from Sasuke as he felt the blow of the words on his ego. He hated being called 'weak', he hated the insinuation that he had only been 'playing' at 'family games', but at the same time, he had to accept that perhaps this was the truth. / *I'll never become strong at the rate I'm going. Kakashi isn't as strong as Itachi or Orochimaru, he can't give me what I need... /*

"Come with us, Sasuke-sama. If you do, Orochimaru will give you strength." This time it was the red headed girl who spoke up. Her words cemented all of Sasuke's indecisions and destroyed Sasuke's nervousness. The last remaining heir to the Uchiha nodded in acquisition to their requests, after all, it was going exactly as he had planned in the first place.

"We warmly welcome you to become our leader, Sasuke-sama. I am Kidoumaru, guardian of the East Gate." The one with six arms gave a mocking, sweeping bow.

"I am Jiroubou of the South Gate." The big, fat yet pale man gave a small nod in respect.

"Tayuya, North Gate." The red headed female of the group snorted in reply, not even trying to act friendly or respectful.

"And I, as you already know, am Sakon, Guardian of the West Gate. Welcome to Sound, Sasuke-sama." Sakon finished and all five of them firmly set off into the night, leaving behind the quiet village of Konoha.

Sakura was humming to herself as she skipped her way up the stairs towards her team mate's apartment. It was common knowledge that almost every single eligible girl in Konoha knew of Uchiha Sasuke's residence but since the boy was so reclusive and anti-social, he had managed to threaten most of his oblivious fan club that going to visit it at his apartment was more than forbidden and would result in a harsh punishment. However, Sakura being his teammate had special privileges, one being that she could visit him as long as her reasons were not personal and had more to do with Ninja activities. And this time, it really wasn't a personal reason that she had come looking for the solitary Uchiha.

In fact, she had come to him for the explicit reasons of asking him to train with her. With Naruto gone out of the village due to a mission, and Kakashi in a coma, Sakura was getting rather tired of just training with Ino and under the guidance of Lee since Haku had become extra busy after the Chuunin Exams dealing with all the minor injuries and casualties. Now that she had become an unofficial Chuunin, Sakura had realised that she really needed to become stronger fast. And whatever advantage she could gain, she would pursue it, including how to convince her teammate to train with her.

She refused to stay as the same old, weak Sakura that most people still sees her as.

However, as she finally reached the front door to the apartment belonging to Sasuke, Sakura suddenly felt very uneasy, as if there was a sixth sense telling her that something was wrong.

The door looked normal enough, but it was just too eerily silent within the room and outside in the hallway. Suppressing a shiver that wanted to run down her spine, Sakura gathered her courage and knocked twice onto the hard wooden surface of the door. Waiting several seconds without hearing a reply, Sakura knocked again, this time harder. No response. Getting slightly irritated after standing at the doorway for close to a minute, Sakura tried again, but much harder and louder this time. Once again, silence was her answer.

/ Has he gone out or something? Maybe he's already training by himself and I can meet up with him at the training grounds? /

However, no matter how much Sakura tried to rationalise the silence with her own logical thinking, the unsettling feeling inside her heart remained. Releasing a heavy breath of nervousness, Sakura then decided to take things into her hand. */ Right, I'll just unlock the door and take a peak, just to make sure that he really isn't home. /*

Pulling a hair clip out of her hair, Sakura looked around the hallway to make sure that no one was there to witness her thieving skills and lock pick skills. It wasn't something she was really proud of, but somewhere along the way, Sakura had learnt to pick locks with her hairclips. Of course, she could always punch her way through the door, but that would definitely leave evidence that she had forced her way through. Instead, she decided to use her skills in lock picking the door. If Sasuke was there, then she could say she was just testing his awareness of his surroundings. If he wasn't, then there was nothing to explain.

Upon finally unlocking the door and opening it, the cry of 'Sasuke-kun' on the tips of Sakura's tongue suddenly died before it could be released. When she finally entered the room, Sakura was shocked at

the rumpled disarray the room looked. The mattress was off the bed, it's sheets ripped off. On the floor were multiple pieces of broken glass, books, scrolls and other accessories. But what really tore at Sakura's heart was the crumpled piece of paper lying on its own to the side of the room. She recognised it for what it had been, the photograph taken of the newly established team seven.

Suddenly, a flash of panic ceased Sakura's heart as she thought over what could have happened here. And the only logical thought that Sakura could come up with was that he was kidnapped, and she knew exactly who would be interested in the last Uchiha as well. / *Orochimaru!* / In an instant, Sakura had retreated from the room, and ran with all her speed towards the Hokage tower. / *Everyone needs to know about Sasuke's kidnapping! We need to get him back! No matter what the cost!* / This was the only thought that kept repeating itself in Sakura's mind as she rushed towards the authorities knowing that there was simply no time to waste.

"I'm sorry. But I just can't spare any Ninjas at the moment. You'll just have to handle it on your own. I'm sure that the boy is just under some sort of tantrum and had personally disrupted his room on purpose." Hyuuga Hiashi firmly argued from his place behind the Hokage's desk, which was piled mightily high with papers to be signed and scrolls to be looked at.

"But you don't understand!" Sakura yelled in reply, completely shocked and aghast at the complete ignorance of this man. "Sasuke has been kidnapped by Orochimaru! I just KNOW IT!!!" Waving her hands around to display her irritation, Sakura tried very hard to calm down but when faced against Hiashi's impassive face, she really couldn't help herself but continue raving. "Orochimaru has expressed an almost obsessive tendency towards Sasuke. He has shown that during the Second Chuunin Exam. And I just know that he has something to do with Sasuke's disappearance. I swear to you, Sasuke really has been kidnapped. There is no way that he's the type to throw a fit and destroy stuff in his bedroom when he still has

to come back to sleep in it. It's just NOT LIKE HIM TO DO THAT!" Huffing and puffing in anger and frustration, Sakura tried once again to reign in her temper but to no avail.

"I understand your concern, Haruno-san. But my decision stands, I *cannot* send any Shinobis after Uchiha Sasuke, simply because there *is none* that are free at the moment. Everyone is busy with missions or the strengthening of Konoha's borders. There simply aren't any Shinobis that I can spare at the moment. Do you UNDERSTAND!?" Hiashi, himself was also starting to show signs of a hidden temper that was on the edge of being explosive.

"But I can't just sit around and do nothing. I just have a feeling that if we wait any longer, then Sasuke will truly be beyond our reach! Time is running out. We need people to go after him, I just KNOW IT!" Sakura was vehement on her decision to pursue Sasuke.

"FINE!" Standing up from his seat, Hyuuga Hiashi, temporary leader of the Konoha village, glared angrily at the pink haired girl for harassing him so early in the morning about such a small matter. "IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, **YOU** GO AFTER HIM YOURSELF!" He voice loud and clear, rang through out the office and was even heard from people down the hall.

"FINE!" Sakura yelled back, her green eyes almost sparking with the electricity of untamed anger. "I'LL DO JUST THAT. BUT I CAN'T DO IT ALONE!! THAT'S WHY I ASKED FOR **YOUR** HELP! IF YOU WOULD JUST BE **COOPERATIVE** THEN I WOULDN'T EVEN BE YELLING AT YOU RIGHT NOW!!!"

"AND I REPEAT, THERE ARE **NO** CHUUNIN OR JOUNIN RANKED SHINOBI I CAN **SPARE** !!! JUST FORM A GROUP FROM THE AVAILABLE **GENINS** AND GO PURSUE YOUR PATHETIC UCHIHA!!!" Hiashi yelled back, his face becoming more and more red as time pass.

"FINE! I'LL DO JUST THAT!" With that said, Sakura spun around in total anger, punched her way through the door and slammed it hard

behind her. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU ALL LOOKING AT!" She growled at all the people standing around just gapping at her, before they all scooted off, avoiding her lethal glare as they went. Sakura huffed one more time before she stomped away, quickly running through her mind all of the available Genins and deciding which were worthy and strong enough to bring along. After a while of scrounging through her head, Sakura decided that she should first visit Shikamaru. */ After all, he has proven himself to be Chuunin material, and he is a genius with an IQ higher than my own. /*

"How troublesome." These were the first words out of Shikamaru's mouth as Sakura finally finished her explanations. He sighed tiredly as he returned his gaze towards the determined looking girl standing in front of him. And he sighed again. */ Why me... Why always me... /* "Alright, I'll help." He finally confirmed.

Sakura's tense shoulders finally dropped slightly at Shikamaru's participation. "But..." The shoulders tensed once more.

"You have to understand. If... and I do mean 'IF' the Sound did send people after Sasuke and therefore he was kidnapped, then we have a whole ball of trouble coming our way. There is a high probability that we will run into many fights along the way even before we reach Sasuke. And to make sure that he doesn't even reach the Sound at all, we have to act quickly." Shikamaru theorised in a matter of minutes. Sakura nodded to every point he made, sure that Shikamaru already had everything figured out. "Okay, now, what we do is this. We each have half an hour to round up all the exceptional Genins or anyone else that you think that could be of help. We must leave by then."

"Right." Standing up straight, Sakura mock saluted Shikamaru as if hinting that he was suddenly given the position as 'leader' of the group. She then winked at him confidently before rushing off to find the people she had already decided to find.

Shikamaru could only sigh once more. "Man, this is gonna be troublesome." Before he too, started running towards his own destinations.

Half an hour later, a group of eight people stood proudly at the Konoha gates, some of them huffing and puffing as they had been running around for the last half an hour none stop. Shikamaru decided to step forward and take a good look at all the people who had gathered for this sudden crisis and to judge their worth as part of the team. There was, on the left starting with Akimichi Chouji, Inuzuka Kiba and Akamaru, Hyuuga Neji, Haruno Sakura, Haku, Yamanaka Ino and last but not least, their resident weapons master – Tenten.

/ How troublesome.../ Shikamaru mentally thought while he outwardly cleared his throat to get the attention of everyone present. "Okay, let's start. First of all, I'd like to say that both myself and Sakura are the squad leaders of this suddenly formed group, as we are both unofficial Chuunins just waiting for the new Hokage's signature. Is everyone okay with that?" With a few minor grumbles from Kiba and Akamaru that was subdued very soon, everyone was happy with the leadership outcome.

Shikamaru nodded at their acceptance. "In that case, I'll take up the position of squad leader, with Sakura as my second." Seeing Sakura nod to this suggestion, he continued. "Firstly, let's talk about what we're about to be doing before we get on with our strategies and plans. We are assuming that Uchiha Sasuke has been kidnapped since his apartment has been trash and he, himself, is missing. In this case, think of us as pursuers on a rescue mission. We are also assuming that the kidnappers are heading towards the Sound village, therefore that is where we're headed, into enemy territory."

"Now, since we're heading towards the enemy, there is a very high chance that the enemy will ambush us and kill us all if we're not careful. So, that's why I want us to form a line of formation that can immediately to any enemy attack. If any of you disregard my orders

or act on your own, it may mean the death of all of us, understand?" Seeing the now slightly nervous expression on Kiba's face, as well as the grim determination on Sakura's, Shikamaru decided to continue with his explanations. "We'll move in a single line formation, but each with a particular role to play, and when needed to scatter, we scatter in different directions, okay?" Once again, everyone nodded.

"Firstly, the most important position of forward scout will be Kiba and Akamaru. You know the terrain around Fire Country very well since you always travel around it with Akamaru. Not only that but you've also got a very strong sense of smell, so it'll be easier to track down Sasuke. You are also able to detect any booby traps from the enemy's scents. The single line formation is weak against frontal attacks but you've got Akamaru to compensate for this, so it's more effective to have you up front." Though shocked that he would be taking this position, Kiba and Akamaru seem to warm up to the arrangement quickly and confidently.

"Next is me, the squad leader. Being behind Kiba, I will be able to give orders based on the situation that unfold. Also, I can order the rest of you behind us with hand signals." Lifting his hand to show them the various signals he'll probably be using, Shikamaru then turned his attention to Sakura. "After me is you, Sakura. Since you is my second, you are basically my support. If, under any circumstance, I am incapable of leading, then you will take charge. For now, you will become my second analytical mind to watch over everything. Not to mention, your Genjutsu skills are very helpful as distractions and traps, therefore, it'd be best if you stay somewhere in the middle of the group." Sakura nodded to this as she thought over his decisions.

"After Sakura is Haku." Speaking directly to the only non-Genin/Chuunin in this group, Shikamaru was silently impressed that Sakura had gotten her hands on an actual Medic Nin to come with them. "Due to your fast reactions, speed and fighting experience, you are our senior and our major trump card to be used only as a

last resort. Not only that, you are our Medic Nin, so if anything happen to us, it'll be up to you to fix us up again. This also means that you have to store up most of your Chakra as well, and not use any of your really big, Chakra consuming techniques." Haku smiled disarmingly at the pineapple haired boy in acceptance of the terms and conditions of his role.

"Next is Ino." Looking at Ino, Shikamaru slightly scratched his head. "I know you've become pretty good at close hand combat, especially with swords, but for this mission, I'm putting you as mainly a back-up member. This is because, if we needed to infiltrate the enemies group, you'd be the person to do it with your Shintenshin no Jutsu (Mind Body Switch) and therefore, your own body must be easily protected from all harm." Though grumbling at the fact that she'll probably see no action, Ino did finally consent to the order.

"After Ino is Chouji. You don't have much speed but you pack the biggest 'HIT POWER' in our squad. The rest of us will clear the way for you to finish off the enemy after any surprise attack. Meaning you're the final blow." Moving his gaze from his best friend to the last girl in their group, Shikamaru started about her role in the team.

"Tenten, you're after Chouji. Since you're the weapons master, you usually don't do any close hand combat. That's why you'll be staying near the back of the group and taking out all the enemies that did get close to us. Sort of like an archer of the group, you'll be in charge of getting rid of all the people that the rest of us have missed, and you'll also be acting as back up for Chouji. If he hadn't hit a person, it'll be your job to hit it for him." The two bun haired girl nodded in a serious manner.

"Finally, the last position is Neji. I'm going to have you handle the most difficult job as the rear lookout. With Byakugan you can make sure that there are no blind spots in the line. And that, completes our line formation." Kneeling on the floor and pulling out a scroll from his pack, Shikamaru out rolled some of the scroll before starting to doddle on them. "Listen up and examine this carefully." He told them as they all gathered around him to look at what he was doing.

"Look at your appointed scouting area depicted in this drawing. Kiba will be looking out front, I will also be looking frontward by at a wider scope. Sakura, like me, will also be looking frontward and the two of us will be double-checking our area together. Haku and Chouji will both look to the left and double-checking the area while Ino and Tenten will look over the right side of our group. That leaves you, Neji to be the single rear lookout. Now, I want to what our current battle strength is." He said as he rolled up his previously used scroll and put it away. "Let me check all of your equipment right now. Then I can keep what you all have in mind while thinking up a strategy next time. Any questions?" Everyone shook his or her heads in answer.

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Shikamaru then released it before opening his eyes once again to take in his new comrades in arms. "Now that everyone know what they're doing, let me just tell you all the most important thing." He gave them all a dramatic pause before restarting his train of thought. "Uchiha Sasuke is not a very close friend of mine, nor is he really important to me." Here, Shikamaru shifted his gaze to Sakura, who looked slightly depressed by his words, but he went on anyway. "However! He is a fellow Shinobi from the Hidden Leaf Village, just like you and me. He is one of US; he is our comrade! This is why we'll risk our lives for him; this is the way of the Leaf. Even someone like me, who thinks everything is so troublesome, can't sit back and do nothing. I am responsible for all your lives, and I promise you all I will do my best to make sure that each and everyone of you return home, safe and sound." Shikamaru declared in a very clear, very determined voice.

With that said, the spirits of each and everyone of all those present seem to lift with determination and admiration. In silence, they all turn as one in the direction of the Sound, and set off on their journey to retrieve the lost Uchiha, not afraid of anything that stands in their way.

Unbeknownst to those who had depart from the village, there were two who were left behind by the rest of their comrades and

companions. Rock Lee stood silently, leaning against the wall of surrounding the village of Konoha, mentally berating himself for his current weakness, and his bad luck at missing out on such an opportunity to help his friends.

Several metres away from Lee stood the dejected form of Hyuuga Hinata. She had actually been asked to join their group to pursue the last Uchiha, however, before she could announce her intentions (while still looking shy and nervous) she was beaten to the punch by her own father. He had forbidden her to pursue to boy, berating her for her weakness and her worthlessness in front of Sakura and the others; and most of all, he had forbid her newly formed friends from ever entering the Hyuuga estate, especially Haruno Sakura, whom her father had suddenly grown very irritated at. It was all a very sad existence that she lived in, and one without much hope either.

After travelling for almost an hour in the direction of the Sound village at top speed, Kiba and Akamaru finally found the scent of Sasuke. But the news wasn't all good news.

"Are you sure?" Shikamaru asked tiredly, frowning despite the good news that they really were on the right track.

"Yeah, we're sure. There were four of them with Sasuke as he went. They performed some kind of Jutsu here; both Akamaru and me can still smell the weird smoke lingering in the air. And it happened recently too, probably only a few hours ago." Kiba nervously stated.
(1)

"What do you mean by weird smoke?" Sakura asked as she skimmed through her mind, looking for any reference on 'weird smoke' from anything she had ever read before. "Like a smoke bomb?"

"No, nothing like a smoke bomb." Kiba shook his head vehemently. "I'm not sure exactly *what* they were doing, but somehow, the very air itself is still rather dense and compact, almost thick like its very

heavy or have been sucked and squashed together forcefully. And, as I said, there's this sort of weird smell in it that I've never encountered before." Shaking his head in frustration, Kiba growled out. "I just don't know how to explain it to you guys."

After a moment's pause, Shikamaru looked towards Sakura. "Do you know of any type of jutsu that burns the air and compacts it all at once?"

A moment of thinking later, Sakura came to a decision about the anomaly. "There are some Jutsus out there that does have that type of effect. I mean, some of the Katon Jutsus do, like the Karyuu Endan do, but since none of the surrounding trees are affected, I don't think it was an 'attack' Jutsu that they were using. After my analysis, I come to the conclusion that it's some kind of sealing Jutsu. Only sealing Jutsus can be used to affect a certain subject or object, without actually affecting the rest of the environment." Sakura concluded.

Shikamaru nodded at her assessment. "That probably means that it'll be more difficult for us to rescue Sasuke as he is probably sealed." Releasing another heavy sigh, Shikamaru shrugged again before straightening himself.

"Um... there's one other thing." Kiba nervously pointed out. "Akamaru says that they're all pretty strong."

Shikamaru nodded, keeping this vital piece of information in mind when they do finally catch up to their enemies. "Okay, let's keep going. We have to speed up our pursuit or else we'll never catch up before they reach the Sound. And if that happens, we would have failed our mission and our comrade. But from now on, be extra careful, guys. Keep all your eyes open for traps of any sort." With all in agreement, they set off once again after Sasuke.

Hours had passed as the group continued on their way, and everything seems to go fine. That is, until Kiba brought the group to

a sudden halt. "Stop!" He yelled in abrupt panic, and the others followed, all landing on different trees waiting for his explanations on what's going on.

"What's wrong, Kiba?" All signs of laziness had left Shikamaru's expression a long time ago, all that's left is a seriousness that expressed his true potential as a Chuunin leader.

Kiba sniffed the air around him cautiously. "I can smell them. Their scent is all over the place." He says as he narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"Neji. If you would, please?" Shikamaru requested.

Quickly completing a short list of hand seals, the Hyuuga in their group announced: "Byakugan!" As the veins around his eyes throbbed with the increase of Chakra flowing through them, Neji quickly assessed their surroundings effectively, gaining a general understanding of what the enemy had laid before them before releasing his seal. "Explosive tags." He stated simply. "They've set it up in such a way that it creates a barrier seal." He explained.

"What does that mean?" Chouji asked nervously.

"It's a form of Ninjutsu trap. 'Seal-type' traps are triggered when an enemy enters an area encircled by the trap seals. It's a type of high-class Ninjutsu." Shikamaru explains before sighing dejectedly. "I guess that means that we can't go across the trees anymore. We'll just have to travel on land."

As the eight of them landed on the ground, they all looked up in astonishment. Shikamaru sigh dejectedly again, before standing up to start leading his team through this particular hazardous area. "Damn, the path is full of traps." He mumbled as he and the rest of his comrades carefully stepped over several wires that were laid out all over the place to trap any pursuers from following the enemies. "Luckily at least for us, they seem to be short on time, which is why these traps were easy to spot." He countered to himself.

Suddenly, someone in their group called for a halt of all movements, but this time, it wasn't Shikamaru or Kiba. "Stop! Everyone." Haku shouted out in anxiety, immediately gaining the attention of all participants in this rescue team.

"What's wrong, Haku-sempai?" Sakura, having jumped up in fright at Haku's sudden outburst, mentally tried to calm herself as she asked her tutor what he had spotted.

Haku pointed to one particular wire on the floor. "You see that?" he asked the rest of them.

"Yeah. Of course we do. It's just another one of those wire traps that we've been avoiding ever since we started walking on land!" Kiba retorted, obviously not getting why the feminine boy had stopped their progress suddenly.

"Do you see this one then?" Haku asked as he quickly did a one-handed seal, resulting in a small mirror being formed behind the original wire that everyone could see. The ice mirror was tilted in such a way that the sun's light reflected off it at precise angle, which revealed the hidden 'green' wire that was beneath the original one.

"I see, one of the wires – they made it so that it is very visible under the sun light, while a second wire, camouflaged in green is beneath it and further ahead. Making it so that the opponent underestimate them and step on the second wire when they avoided the first one. A double trap basically. Ingenious." Shikamaru contemplated out loud.

"And this isn't the only wire, either." Haku commented as he completed another one-handed seal. Suddenly, multiple small mirrors were formed in mid-air floating all over the area. The sunlight that was reflected and refracted from each and every small mirror revealed all the multitude of different coloured wires hidden in such a way that the naked eye couldn't possibly see them. There were literally hundreds of wires that surrounded that area alone.

"Well. Shit! What are we gonna do now?" Kiba groaned as he looked around the small clearing and at all the hidden wires. "Are we still gonna cross? Can we even avoid all of them?" He asked dejected.

"It's a very well laden trap, even though it seems to be rushed, as if they were running out of time. Hmm..." Shikamaru rubbed his chin, thinking to himself.

"It means they're resting." Neji concluded. And to prove his point, he activated his eyes again. "Byakugan!" With his enhanced eyesight moving quickly over the distance, Neji was finally able to see their enemies – the four Sound guards and a large barrel resting on a small clearing almost 2 hundred metres ahead of them. "I found them. They're resting currently, about 2 hundred metres ahead of us." He declared as he released his special eye technique.

"Good. We've finally caught up to our enemies then. Now, just let me formulate a plan first and then we'll start our mission and bring Sasuke back." Shikamaru stood strong as he displayed a determined expression on his face.

"Wait, Shikamaru." Haku called out once more, this time, his eyes were narrowed in suspicion even more than before.

"What is it this time, Haku-san? More traps?" Shikamaru asked, though part of him already knew the answer.

"I'm not sure." Haku replied. The first mirror that he had created in order to show the others the green camouflaged wire was tilted once again, this time, highlighting a third line that was impossibly thin, like a spiders web and yet was laid in such a way that it was obviously being coordinated with the other two wires. "It's not a wire, but definitely not normal either." Haku concluded.

"Damn. The two wire traps were set like that on purpose. It's a triple trap." Shikamaru sighed heavily. "So basically, if we take one step further, no matter how careful we are, we're bound to disrupt at least one of these three-layer traps."

"So it would seem." Haku nodded.

"Then how are we going to get across to reach Sasuke in the first place?" Ino asked frustrated. "My Shintenshin no Jutsu (Mind Body Switch) definitely doesn't expand such a long distance."

"I can." Haku declared. "I can create a mirror and walk through it, transporting myself to another mirror I create. Unfortunately, I am unable to take others with me. Only *I* can walk through mirrors myself." Haku explained, deflating the hope that had arisen in most of the other's hearts with his first statement.

"I can teleport too, and I can take others with me as well." Shikamaru stated quietly, which definitely caught the other's attention. "At least I think I can." This statement deflated the original hope once again, and they looked on towards their leader in exasperation, but Shikamaru only shrugged in reply. "Look, I've never tried to take another person with me before, but theoretically, it should work. There's no reason for it to not work." He prompted.

"However, I'll need to have this particular kunai..." Here, Shikamaru pulled a seemingly ordinary kunai with a strange black paper wrapped around the hilt and showed it to everyone. "...attached to a large patch of shadows before I can even do anything. And that includes the fact that it must be attached to a patch of land that doesn't have all this wires around the place." The lazy Chuunin explained his theory while indicating he was talking about all those troublesome wires traps.

Haku nodded again, this time considering his options. "Neji, are you able to see if you can find a place, any place that is nearer to our enemies hideouts that doesn't have all these wires?" Haku implored the white-eyed boy.

"I'll try." Neji answered, reactivating his Byakugan. It took him considerably longer than before but he did find a place that is half way up a giant tree with many branches and areas of lodgings, and it also doesn't seem to have as much wires sticking to it as possible.

With that verified, Haku performed his own hand seals, creating a human size mirror directly in front of him, seemingly flouting in mid air. The ex-Mist Shinobi easily merged into the mirror without any trouble at all, while the rest of the team waited for him to return. After a few more minutes of waiting, everyone was slightly startled when Haku's head slowly emerged from the motionless mirror again.

"It's done. I've stuck the kunai directly in the middle of a large patch of shadows, hidden under many branches and leaves. I hope that's what you needed to get it done." Haku inquired.

"Yes, it is. Thank you." Shikamaru expressed his gratitude. "Okay, everyone, grab hold of me tightly or else you guys will get lost in the Shadow realm while I teleport us all there." Doing as told, each of the group members in this particular rescue team (Haku not included as he already has his own mirror for travelling purposes) grabbed hold of some part of Shikamaru, ranging from his clothes to his arms.

Once ready, Shikamaru quickly performed his own unique hand seals that confirmed the teleportation. "Kage Ho! (Shadow Walk)" (2) Instantly, him and everyone else around him dropped down seemingly into the darkness of the shadows. It happened so quickly that even the panicked Kiba and Ino didn't have time to voice their fears before they were all sucked into the dark mass below them.

Hundreds of metres away and half way up a giant tree, seven people suddenly emerged from the side of tree stump. Having emerged from such a weird angle, many fell forward or sideward due to the sudden pull of Gravity. Kiba and Akamaru instantly launched themselves onto a near by branch before they could fall completely on their faces. Tenten had attached a steel chain around another branch so she was contently hanging in mid-air for the moment. Ino and Sakura used their Chakra to keep them attached to the side of the tree, just as Shikamaru and Neji were doing the same. Chouji had rolled down some distances before finding a lower branch to land comfortably on, while Haku had just reappeared from his mirror and simply stood languidly on top on one of the higher branches.

Finding a comfortable place to sit, Shikamaru slowly leaned back against the think tree trunk. Though he had never performed the Kageho (Shadow Walk) with so many people attached... actually, he's never performed the Kageho with anyone attached – he found that it was rather exhausting. The more people he took with him in his teleportation, the more Chakra the technique consumes. So now, he decides to take a little break himself.

"Here Shikamaru." Chouji handed out a small black pill to the Shadow enhancer, whom took it promptly and swallowed.

"Thanks Chouji." Getting back onto his feet, Shikamaru called out: "Okay people. This is what we're gonna do." Finally catching all attention onto himself, Shikamaru starts mapping out their plan of action.

While resting quieting under the trees, the peace was disrupted when Kidoumaru suddenly felt a pulling sensation on one of his strings. It was followed by another string being tugged upon and a third one being jerked in a different direction. That was when he knew, precisely, that enemies had wandered into their territory. However, before he had time to warn the others, a kunai suddenly flew into the clearing, tied upon its hilt were three explosion notes, already activated to go off.

Without wasting any time, Sakon immediately launched a kunai of his own, hitting directly onto the enemy kunai, and causing a giant eruption just on the outskirts of their clearing. The giant explosions blew trees and foliages, but were still some distances away, so none of the elite Sound Four were injured at all.

"Come out now, all of you, or else your comrades will DIE!" Kidoumaru yelled as he roughly pulled three of his spider-thin strings, ultimately tangled onto the legs of three Konoha Genins, who came tumbling out of the distance and landing hard onto the ground before the Four Sound guards. It was then that someone – who was still hidden – threw a smoke bomb directly between the Konoha

Genins and the Sound Shinobis, creating a massive smoke cloud that covered the entire area, including the Sound Four.

"What the hell are you guys playing at?" Kidoumaru scowled in an aggravated manner, He has not happy about having his entire vision impaired and had become very suspicious of the strange actions taken by the Leaf Ninjas. It was during his inattentiveness that a stray kunai was launched from the middle of the smoke cloud towards them, but at such an angle that it was obviously going to miss them by a mile. Instead, the stray kunai landed somewhere behind them. "Heh! What the hell was that? You missed us by a MILE!" Kidoumaru continued to taunt.

Slowly but surely, the clouds of smoke and dust cleared, revealing seven young Shinobis all wearing the head protector of the Hidden Leaf Village proudly on their foreheads. "Che... They sent Genins after us?! How pathetic!" This time, it was Sakon who sneered at their young rivals. "Let's finish you all off quickly so that we can..." His sentence was cut shortly however, when he realised he couldn't move his hand, in fact, he couldn't move his body at all.

And contrary to the Sound four, the Seven Konoha Shinobis in front of them began smirking firmly. "Great work! Shikamaru. Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Imitation technique) was a success!" Kiba yelled as he punched his arm into the air as a sign of victory.

And true to his word, Shikamaru stood as nonchalantly as possible behind the Four Sound guards, the shadow under his feet firmly attached to those of the Sound Four. As mapped out by Shikamaru's plan – Ino, Kiba and Chouji were meant to walk around, catching their opponent's attention to distract them, while Neji launched the kunai with explosive notes attached in a faint assault against their enemies, further distracting them. Sakura was then responsible for launching the smoke bomb at the perfect moment, to cover what the Leaf teams were about to do as well as creating shadows on the ground around and behind the Sound Shinobis. All Shikamaru had to do was throw one of this special teleportation kunais behind the group, teleport himself there, and then perform the Kagemane no

Jutsu (Shadow Imitation Technique) without any of their enemies noticing. It was a complex yet effective plan that had gone smoothly like clockwork.

"Okay, Kiba. Quickly grab that barrel and then we can set off home." Shikamaru commanded in a firm voice, he was so busy in maintaining the Jutsu that he didn't notice the cruel smirk that was on Sakon's face, as the other 'head' on his body had disappeared without anyone's notice. Even before Kiba had taken a single step forward, the Leaf team's attention was suddenly brought towards Shikamaru as he abruptly yelled in pain and released the Kagemane no Jutsu due to his own distraction.

"Shikamaru! Look out! There are more Shurikens heading your way!" Haku yelled, but was too late. Shikamaru was too slow in dodging the rest of the shurikens that had been launched from behind him, and are now currently embedded deeply in his back. Even with the Chuunin vest protecting him, blood could still visibly be seen dribbling down his newly ironed vest.

"SHIKAMARU!" Ino screamed in fright as she watch her teammate stagger slightly forward due to the force of the shurikens embedded in his back. But what made it worse was that now, the Sound Four were completely free and were directly all their hateful gazes their team caption.

"HAAAA!" Jiroubou yelled as he swung his giant right arm around, smashing into Shikamaru's face and launching him further forward towards the direction of his teammates. It all happened so fast that, to many of the silent Konoha Genins watching on, it almost happened in slow motion.

"SHIKAMARU!!!" Chouji yelled in panic as he quickly performed one of his family techniques. "Baika no Jutsu! (Multi-Size Technique)" The chubby boy called out as his body automatically enlarged itself into a giant ball-like structure. He quickly manoeuvred himself in the direction of where Shikamaru was launched towards, stopping just in time to block Shikamaru's fated impact upon a large tree. With his

impact absorbed by Chouji's body, Shikamaru slowly slid down to the hard ground, desperately fighting against the unconsciousness that was gripping tighter and tighter over his mind.

"Shikamaru-kun!" Haku yelled as he quickly skidded to a stop down beside the injured boy, before performing some seals and starting to heal the newly formed injuries. "Just hold on, Shikamaru. I'll get up and about as soon as possible!" Haku reassured.

Unfortunately for the Leaf team however, the Sound Four were in no mood to play around, waiting for them to attack. In an instant, Jiroubou had slammed his open palms onto the ground, and yelled in a clear voice: "DOTON! KEKKAI DOROUDOUMU!! (Earth Element: Mud Dome) (3)" As his hands impacted the hard ground, the earth opened itself to his command, splintering and cracking, creating boulders the size of tables and beds in a wide circle that surrounds all of the Konoha Shinobi's present, including Shikamaru, Haku and Chouji. The Genins could only watch in stunned horror as the earth boulders continued to build up from the ground until they completely swallowed all sunlight from reaching the children by creating an absolutely dome over all of them. The silent screams in their mind were met with only darkness, as shadows befall all of them without a hint of mercy.

(To be Continued...)

(1) I'm not going to blab about what the Sound Four actually did to Sasuke, so here's a hint that Sasuke's already in the 'barrel' thing that was being carried by Jiroubou. This is where he 'officially' dies.

(2) Similar to how Kaga can transport Ruri around whenever she wants, Shikamaru can do the same too. But it takes up way more chakra than if he just transport himself.

(3) Okay, it should sound something like that even though I'm not 100 percent sure about the spelling of it and the actual translation. Inane called it 'Kekkai Doroudoumu' – Clay Prison. NarutoFan called

it 'Kekkai Doroutoumu' – Destruction Mud Prison. Anbu/AniemOne called it 'Kekkai Doro Doumu' – Mud Dome. Yeah, so pick one.

Okay... I KNOW this chapter came out later than promised. In fact, I'm still shocked I got it finished at all. But I've been busy fighting off my writer's block for a damn long time, and am only JUST getting back my own inspiration and stuff, so it's been tough for me too.

I'd like to thank EVERYONE for reviewing and continuing to read my story, even though I haven't exactly found time to get back to each and everyone of you. Please know that I DO read EVERY SINGLE REVIEW that was written to me, and I APPRECIATE ALL THE THOUGHTFUL AND SUPPORTIVE COMMENTS. Sometimes, they really are the only things that continue to drive me to keep writing. So please keep them up. And once again, THANK YOU ALL!!!

P.S. By the way, I might be needing a few more beta-readers / proof-readers to help me edit my chapters from now on, if there are anyone out there who are interested, please email me at: sheila (the 'at' symbol) iinet (dot) net (dot) au. THANKS!!

Pursuit II

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After the Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter 5: Pursuit II

" **Demon's talk**" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

"---" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Warning: PG-13. There are spoiler warnings for Book 21 onwards, and animation episodes 112 onwards. This Chapter however, showcases a bit about the strengths of Ino and Sakura in real battle. So, there's definitely a bit of 'girl-power' in here. And it also gives light to Haku as more than just a secondary character.

Chapter 5

Shikamaru gritted his teeth as the wounds in his back throbbed with pain. Now that the shuriken had been removed, all he had to fear was bleeding to death; after all he had at least five puncture wounds on his back alone. Blood loss coupled with the blow he had received to the head had given him a massive headache, he considered himself lucky that he was not concussed.

Haku continued to summon forth more Chakra as he desperately tried to stop the bleeding. It wasn't exactly a difficult job but for some odd reason Haku kept on feeling his Chakra being sucked away from

his very hands while performing the healing Jutsu, as if it was being physically absorbed by something else, and it was hindering his healing abilities dramatically.

Frustrated with his lack of progress, Haku shouted in slight panic and irritation. "What the hell is going on?" He growled into the darkness of the confined cave-like structure. "I keep on pushing Chakra into Shikamaru and yet the Chakra seems to be slipping away from where I want it to go?! If this goes on, I won't be able to heal him at all!"

At Haku's exclamation, Ino and Chouji had stumbled over to Shikamaru, both terribly worried for the boy's health as well as panicked by their dire situation. Neji, after hearing Haku's statements, immediately activated his Byakugan to analyse exactly what's going on.

"My god..." He whispered harshly, bringing the attention of all of his teammates on him alone. "This isn't an ordinary clay wall... Our Chakra is being sucked dry, right into these very walls. Our every strength is being snatched away as we speak. If this goes on... it's gonna be bad..." Neji summarised gloomily as he gazed at his own hands.

"Well, then, all we have to do is force our way out! Ain't it!?" Kiba snarled, slightly scared and definitely irritated at their predicament. "I'll take care of it!" He exclaimed as he threw a soldier pill into Akamaru's open mouth. Once the surge of Chakra had completed its course within Kiba and Akamaru's bodies, due to the digestion of the soldier pills, they immediately launched into their battle stances. Turning themselves into half man, half beast, using Gijyuu Ninpou: ShiKyaku no Jutsu (Human Beast Ninja Art: Quadruped Technique), Kiba and Akamaru instantly launched into their most renowned Ninja technique, the Gatsuuga (Piercing Fang). The two boys (the real one and the duplicate) bounced from one end of the enclosed cave to the other to a side wall and then the opposite wall. Again and again, they pounded themselves against the hard rock surface that entrapped them. But after several seconds of this continual assault, both soon

grew tired, as most of their Chakra was being sucked out even as they perform their Taijutsu techniques.

Huffing and puffing in tiredness, Kiba swore as he watched all the multiple craters on the wall, which had been caused by his and Akamaru's technique, slowly start to recover and reform. "F###k! KUSO! I don't believe this! The BLOODY holes recovered straight after the damage was done!"

Hearing this, Shikamaru gasped in understanding. "Chouji!" He called out even as he gave his best friend a determined look.

As if understanding Shikamaru's silent plea, Chouji suddenly pulled out a bag of chips from no where and started stuffing his face.

"What the hell are you doing Chouji!? Desperate to finish your last meal!? Well, I'll tell you one thing, I'm not ready to give up yet!" Kiba growled in frustrated anger as he watched the chubby boy munch down on his just desserts. "Oi! Shikamaru, do you think you can pull that Shadow Teleportation thing you did before and pull us out of here?!" Kiba suddenly suggested the idea even as it first turned up in his head.

But Shikamaru only shook his head. "Too weak." He murmured. "And not to mention, any Chakra I use to bind the Shadows are going to be sucked away even before I perform the seals. There's no way I can perform anything here. The Shadow space won't form at all unless the shadow itself is neutral or stable... With an outside Chakra running underneath these very stonewalls and ground however... this deviant Chakra is too close to the shadow for me to manipulate it properly..." (1)

Still not quite understanding all of Shikamaru's explanations, Kiba opted to growl his frustrations out and glare furiously and desperately at the holes he had created. He watched despairingly as the walls slowly recovered.

"And until we're out of here. I can't successfully heal him either."
Haku said, in a very worried tone of voice.

"Then what the hell do we do?! Stay here and wait for our deaths?!"
Kiba shouted in anger and frustration, taking it all out on his fellow teammates.

"Shut up, Kiba!" Chouji growled dangerously even as he continued to stuff his face full of chips.

"Shut up you FAT A###! Why I ought to..." Kiba continued the argument.

"Quiet!" Sakura called out. Funnily enough, the rest of the gang stayed silent after her outburst.

She walked around the enclosed cave wall, knocking every so often on the rock's surface with the back of her knuckles as if to test them for something. She then paused at one particular end for no reason, while the others simply watched her with curiosity.

Suddenly, breathing in deeply to gather a lot of air, Sakura screeched out in her most annoying fan-girl/stalker voice: "Oi! YOU STUPID FAT ORANGED HAired FREAK!!!! LET US OOOOUUUUUTTTTTT!!!!!"

The rest of her teammates immediately covered their ringing ears to try and muffle out Sakura's awful screeching voice, but it was to no avail. Due to the fact that the cave was enclosed, her voice literally bounced from one end of the cave to the other, creating echoes and refracting off the rough surfaces. However, once the ringing in their ears started fading, and the echoes died, they were able to hear the grumbling of the man responsible for their predicament shouting back at them.

"Shut up, you brats! I'm not gonna let you out until I suck you DRY!"
The Sound Ninja rebuffed, seriously annoyed at having been insulted by an annoying girl.

Unbeknownst to the Sound Nin however, Sakura was smirking over the fact that he had even responded in the first place. "Hey, Ino-pig." She called, this time, much more quietly than before.

"Shut up, Big-forehead girl! Don't go around calling ME 'Ino-pig'!" Ino immediately argued.

"Yeah, whatever." Sakura shrugged, ignoring her best friend's irritation, but instead, she pointed to one end of the cave wall. "Can you please use your sword and create some scrapes over on that side of the wall?" She suddenly ordered in a no-nonsense voice.

Ino looked at the pink-haired girl almost suspiciously. "What are you on, Forehead..." She started saying but was interrupted.

"Just do what I tell you to!" Sakura growled, rather irritated herself at being ignored because she was second in command after all.

"Fine!" Ino grunted, before stepping forth towards the designated area where she was supposed to try and chop her way through. Drawing on her first and favourite sword that she had spent almost half a year's allowance on; she held it calmly and confidently in front of her.

The other members of the rescue team watched on in concentration and fascination, as this was the first time they had ever witnessed Ino use her newly trained weapon, all of them except Sakura and Haku of course, whom already knew of her talent in that field.

Bending her legs slightly at the knee, Ino lifted her sword in an awkward stance. Her left hand holding on to the hilt of the sword, but instead of having the sword aiming directly at the wall, it was pulled backwards, close to her own face, and having her right hand's fingers touching the tip of it lightly. Silently, as if waiting for a hidden signal, her right hand swiftly pulled away from the sword's tip while the sword itself was being pulled around by the left wrist in a flicking motion, resulting in a large swing across the cave walls. Ino, without moving the position of her planted feet, bent down slightly and pulled

her rapidly swing sword backwards, behind her own body. She then quickly twisted her wrist again before plugging the sword's very sharp tip directly into the wall. Once again, with a swift twist of the hilt, the sword was freed to do more damage on to the wall as it slowly recovered from the rapid scars that appear on its once solid surface.

Twist after twist, flick after flick. In a matter of ten or so seconds, Ino had been able to create a large area of scars just on the cave walls itself just using her single sword. The damage itself was on par with what Kiba and Akamaru had been able to do with their own Gatsuuga technique, but it was obvious that Ino had needed way less Chakra and force to do the same amount of damage, in less time and with much less effort, it was quite an efficient technique.

The others were silent, in awe of Ino's swift and deadly-accurate moves, each swing causing a very delicate and precise length of scar. This wasn't just random swinging to be expected from a novice. It was a defined, exquisite and deadly dance, each swing meticulously calculated to a 'T' and performed to its very best efficiency and effectiveness. Neji could even imagine how those moves would have been used against a large onslaught of enemies if Ino were ever to be surrounded during a real fight. Overall, it was surprisingly scary, scary enough to warrant Neji's respect.

"Neji! Use your Byakugan. You should be able to see the wall's weaknesses now." Sakura orders abruptly brought the others out of their own musings of Ino's new abilities. Neji, doing as he was told by his second commander, analysed the varying rate that Chakra was being absorbed from their own body, even as it is being sapped into the very walls, helping the rock to recuperate and heal itself.

"I see!" Neji suddenly exclaimed. And without being told to, he quickly flicked a kunai in the direction of where the wall was weakest. "That's where the wall's weakness is." He told them.

"Good. Chouji. Do your thing!" Shikamaru suddenly ordered, as if having read Sakura's plan and approved of her method.

The others quickly moved out of the way, even while Chouji finished off the last of his chips before performing his trait Jutsu. "Baika no Jutsu! (Multi-size Technique!)" He called as his body instantly enlarged into a huge round ball. Rotating himself into a large bowling ball, Chouji directed his attack at the part of the wall where Neji had struck his kunai. "NIKUDAN SENSU! (Human Cannon Ball!) (2)" The now revolving ball of muscle and Chakra yelled as Chouji furiously scraped and drilled his way through the wall, before finally, the stone wall gave way and the Konoha Shinobis were finally free.

Once everyone was out of the stone cave that had entrapped them, each member of the rescue team retreated to a safer distance from their enemy, not knowing what to expect next but ready none the less. All except Haku were busy scanning the surrounding, watching out for their enemy even while the dust and smoke slowly but surely cleared to give them a good view. Haku, was at the moment, busy finishing off his healing of Shikamaru's shallow wounds. Without the Chakra absorbing technique hindering him, Haku was able to quickly render Shikamaru back to normal. Once that was done, even Shikamaru and Haku stood up, readying themselves for anything that came at them.

With all of his prey now freed, Jiroubou decided (though rather reluctantly) to release his own Jutsu. Once his hands had left the surface of the artificial mound that he had created the entire cave collapsed in on itself. Without the addition of Chakra keeping it up, the whole structure simply broke apart into singular rocks, stone, earth and dust.

Looking around with his Byakugan activated, Neji started explaining the situation at hand to the group's recuperated Squad leader. "He's the only one left. The others are now on their way towards the Sound, about 3 kilometres ahead of us at this moment in time."

"So... You got out of my barrier Jutsu..." Jiroubou stated nonchalantly, but then he narrowed his eyes. "Impressive... from pathetic trash, that is..." Jiroubou sneered cruelly at the Konoha genins, even when he was surrounded eight to one.

"TRASH?! WHO THE HELL ARE YOU TO CALL US TRASH??!!!"

Kiba yelled as he launched himself at the enemy... only to find himself unable to move. Looking down onto his feet, he found that he was trapped in one of Shikamaru's jutsus, the Kagemane no Jutsu.

"Oi! Shikamaru! What the hell are you doing?!" He yelled at his squad leader in frustration, anger and shock, wondering why the hell he was the only one being constrained in such a way.

"Keep your cool, Kiba!" Shikamaru ordered. "This is NOT the time to be reckless and launch yourself at an unknown enemy. The last time I did that, I got caught with six shuriken at my back! You want to do the same!?" The pineapple headed boy uncharacteristically growled at Kiba, seemingly more frustrated at their situation than he would admit; this was far off from his plan. "We've already lost our chance at bringing back Sasuke this time, due to my error in judgement. I won't let you make the same mistake as me."

It seems his words finally pulled back Kiba's arrogance and impulsiveness. It was true that all their hard work at pursuing Sasuke and finally catching up with their enemy was now put on hold due to their surprise capture within the special barrier Jutsu. If they wasted any more time, then they would truly lose the chance to bring back Sasuke at all. Now was NOT the time to act on your own, Kiba admitted to himself.

"Heh... so this mutt actually listens to his owner, huh?!" Jiroubou sneered once again, while performing a short list of hands seals and slammed one palm onto the ground again. "Doton! Kekkai Drou Doumu!! (Earth Element: Mud Dome)" Jiroubou called as a wall of stone started growing out from the ground once more.

"SHIT! Everyone! Escape! NOW!" Shikamaru called, even as Kiba threw a smoke bomb at their enemy to obscure their escape.

When the smoke cleared, there was only Jiroubou in the entire clearing. "Che... Let the hunt begin..." Jiroubou grunted as he started walking towards the surrounding forest of the Fire country.

Somewhere deep inside the forest, the rescue team that Shikamaru and Sakura had formed, gathered together to discuss their strategy from now on. "Okay... From here on end, I think it's best if we split up into two groups. One to continue the pursuit of Sasuke before he gets to close to the Sound border, while the other group stays here to fight that big freak." Shikamaru explained. "It's obvious that even if we stay as a group, we still won't be as effective in defeating him." The others nodded, agreeing with Shikamaru's suggestion.

"In that case, I'll take Chouji and Ino with me while we distract and find a way to defeat that bozo, while the rest of you take off after Sasuke. Sakura!" Here, Shikamaru paused in his orders to look directly at Sakura. "From now on, you're in charge of the group that goes after Sasuke. You've already displayed your intelligence and knowledge over most other villages' Jutsu while we were in that barrier technique already. I'll trust you to complete our mission for us."

Sakura nodded determinately at Shikamaru's words, while Kiba pondered what he had meant when Shikamaru praised the pinked haired girl's intelligence.

"What do you mean by that?" He asked even while Akamaru whined softly in confusion. "She hadn't done much while we were in that cave thing? Hell! She didn't even lift a single finger!" The boy groaned, wanting to be put in charge.

Shikamaru could only sigh at the expression displayed on Kiba's face, even while Sakura's eyebrow twitched in annoyance. "Kiba..." He called patiently. "Remember how Sakura was walking around the cave, knocking on its surfaces every few steps; she was testing it's thickness by listening to the sound it makes when she knocks on it. She then screamed really loud, again, to measure the thickness of the cave wall as well as the material used to form the walls by analysing the volume and tone of the various echoes that were bouncing off the walls. When we heard that Sound guy grumbling, she recognised where he was actually standing and then asked Ino to attack the wall directly opposite of his position. Followed by asking

Neji to analyse which area had the least amount of Chakra, which is the area with the slowest healing rate, as well as probably the thinnest walls. And finally, we had Chouji ram through it." He paused to let all the information sink in, letting Kiba finally realise what a complicated set of analytical skills and decisions Sakura had carried out to ensure their freedom.

"So you see... Sakura is MORE than qualified to know how to handle a difficult situation by utilising the various skills and talents of the members in this group." Shikamaru finally concluded. Neji nodded wisely to the analysis while Sakura was blushing slightly at the praise. "That's ALSO why she was designated 'CHUUNIN' material."

Kiba was flushed with embarrassment, while Ino and Tenten snickered softly at his expense. All the fun and cheerfulness that had been evoked among the team members suddenly disappeared however when they all felt a strange tremor ripple the ground underfoot. With the shaking of the ground came the tumbling of the trees, several members of the team had to scatter just to avoid being crushed under the massive trees.

"Heh heh. Finally found you." Someone commented behind them and they all swivelled around, only to watch in horror as Jiroubou picking up a humongous boulder the size of a house. "Doton! Doryuu Dango! (Earth Element: Mud Cannon ball) (3)" Leaning backwards slightly, Jiroubou then propelled the heavy slab of earth towards the Konoha rescue team.

"SHIT!" Shikamaru swore. "Everyone! Scatter!" While most of the team's members followed Shikamaru's order and instantly ran or jumped away, trying to avoid the giant block of stone falling directly on them, both Ino and Haku stood firmly where they stood, not even budging at the sight of the Mud ball coming closer and closer at them.

"HAKU! INO! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!?" Shikamaru called out in panic.

"Don't worry about us, Shikamaru-kun. Ino's about to show us a technique she learned only a few days ago. Aren't you, Ino-san?" Haku stood in a relaxed pose even while he smiled disarmingly at Ino.

Ino only smirked in reply. "Heh. Now it's time to show you how strong I am, Sakura-forehead girl!" She mumbled to herself even while she drew her sword out in front of her and actually started running *towards* the giant block of rock, instead of *away* from it.

"INO!!! ARE YOU F###KING INSANE!!!" Shikamaru yelled desperately at his former teammate, and was just about to perform his Kagemane no Jutsu to stop her from running towards her death, when he was stopped by Sakura's hand on his arm.

"Don't." Sakura stated firmly while looking serious. "Let her show you how strong she's become. I know that she's worked really hard to master this particular technique, and you should open your eyes and see how far she has come."

"But..." Shikamaru's statement was cut off as Sakura shook her head at him.

"Trust her." That was all Sakura said, and those two small words rendered Shikamaru unable to do anything but watch and hope. Turning away from Sakura, Shikamaru continued to watch as Ino ran closer and closer towards the boulder coming right at her, mentally praying to all the Gods he knew to protect her from harm.
(4)

Soon, it came to the point that the boulder was so close that if Ino took two more steps forward she would have rammed her head into it. Suddenly, Ino stopped in her movement, bending down slightly to balance herself, pulling her sword behind her positioning it directing above her head. "NOGAGA! (Elongate!)" (5) She screamed as she deftly swung the sword downward.

Shikamaru used every ounce of energy to restrain himself from running towards his teammate and attempt to rescue her. His brain continued to rant at him, telling him that it was too late. His heart hammered in his chest, dreading to see what the final result was; and his body's muscles strained in every direction, tense to the point of being painful. Standing there doing nothing while his teammate, no his friend, did something crazy.

And all of a sudden, the giant boulder split into two, leaving Ino and Haku perfectly fine directly in the middle of the two large slabs of earthen stone.

The silence in the clearing was deafening and Shikamaru felt his heart begin to beat again.

Everyone was completely astounded by Ino's show of ability. It wasn't everyday that you meet someone with the ability and precise chakra control necessary to expand the natural abilities of a simple sword to such an extent, even if it was only for a split second before the control collapsed. (6)

"HOT DAMN!" Kiba swore as he looked over the perfectly flat sides of the once singular boulder, which had now been split in two.

"YES! I DID IT! HA! TAKE THAT YOU A##H####!" Ino screamed, as she punched her fist into the air in victory. All the other members of the rescue team, excluding Haku and Sakura who were just shaking their heads in exasperation, gaped at her in silent wonder.

/ Has she really changed that much? Without me seeing it? / Shikamaru wondered. */ Have I really been so blind as to not see how much stronger she has gotten? If it weren't for Sakura I would have done something foolish./* Tucking away this moment to remember to get to know her better Shikamaru looked on.

Their victory was short lived however, when a hand suddenly sprung up from underneath Ino and grabbed onto her leg. Ino didn't even have enough time to look down and see what was happening when

she was abruptly pulled off her feet as Jiroubou emerged from the ground. Unimpressed and obviously peeved by her previous technique, Jiroubou savagely swung her around in a wide arc before slamming her down onto the hard ground, smashing the stones and earth beneath her into rubble.

"WHY YOU B#####D!!!" Kiba charged Jiroubou while performing the Gatsuuga, only to have his body slammed against Jiroubou's large, powerful palm before rebounding off and smashing into a nearby tree.

"Is that all you've got?!" Jiroubou snorted, as he bent down to retrieve the unconscious Ino again.

"Let her go!" Shikamaru growled dangerously even though he was still displaying a very calm and determined visage. He had had enough of watching his friends getting creamed by this hateful man.

Abruptly, Jiroubou found himself doing exactly as told, his hands slipping open, only to have Ino's unmoving form fall directly into the hands of Haku before he darted off to somewhere safe to start healing her. That was when Jiroubou found himself to be under the influence of the Kagemane no Jutsu once again. He sneered hatefully at the boy currently controlling his body. "Damn you boy! Is that the only thing you can do, you pathetic excuse of a Shinobi, and even more of a pathetic excuse for a Squad leader!" Glaring at the spiky haired boy, Jiroubou continued his taunts, knowing that it was only a matter of time before he'd have his way with all of these weak fools. "It must be tough to be underlings of such a useless leader! Once I'm loose, I'll take care of **you** first. I'll rip you apart, piece by piece, that I promise." Jiroubou threatened.

On the outskirts of the clearing, both Kiba and Ino had finally regained consciousness, most of their bodies were still sore, even with the added healing abilities of Haku. Shikamaru gazed over the injured members of his team and felt a flinch in his very soul over his mistakes', which had earned them their injuries. He had been so stupid not to be on his toes all the time. / *That's it.* / He thought to

himself firmly as he looked over at Sakura. "Sakura!" He ordered. "What are you doing? Hurry up and gather the rest of the team and go after Sasuke. That's what our mission was in the first place, right? To rescue Sasuke and bring him back. Don't ever forget that! Now, take everyone and go. I'm gonna stay back and deal with this..." He said firmly, but was interrupted at the last moment by his best friend.

"I'LL FIGHT HIM!" Chouji called resolutely from behind him.

"Chouji..." Shikamaru called in a concerned voice, but his best friend was beyond listening.

"LOOK. I'M NOT GONNA LET THIS GUY HURT ONE OF MY FRIENDS AND TEAMMATE, INSULT MY BEST FRIEND AND GET AWAY WITH IT. I'M NOT!!" He shouted in anger, eyes narrowed in fury. "Sakura. Shikamaru. Everyone. Go! I'll stay and take care of this guy. Then I'll come after you guys, I promise." A tense silence followed in which Shikamaru debated over his friend's decision, whether it was a viable option or not. "Shikamaru." The call of his name brought his attention back onto said friend. "Please. Let me take care of this guy for you. I know I can beat him. Trust me."

Once again, those two small, but very powerful words rendered Shikamaru incapable of denying his friends their wishes. Finally, he nodded in acceptance. "Fine, but under one condition: Haku-san and I will stay here to help. I'm not about to leave you alone to fight this monster. After he's defeated, then we'll all catch up to the rest of the group later. Understand?"

Chouji smiled and nodded. He knew that Shikamaru wasn't prepared to abandon him, even if it meant more problems for the rest of the gang. "Yeah, okay, But what about the rest of them?" He motioned to Ino, Neji, Sakura, Kiba and Tenten.

"Sakura, You're in charge of the second squad." Shikamaru's order was followed up by a mocking salute from said girl.

Chouji could only shrug in appreciation, before tossing a small bag towards Shikamaru, whom caught it without any problems. "Those are soldier pills in the bag, give them to everyone." He told him.

After the soldier pills were distributed, Sakura and the rest of the gang (excluding Shikamaru, Chouji and Haku) quickly left the scene to continue their pursuit of Sasuke, never looking back. However, it wasn't a completely peaceful leaving. "You guys better catch up to us or you're gonna get a hell of a scolding from me later on!" Ino, now slightly recovered, had the energy to cry out in annoyance at both of her teammates and her sempai. Shikamaru, Chouji and Haku could only smile crookedly at the threat.

"Heh. You think that I'm gonna let your scrawny little friends catch up to my comrades? You guys are dumber than I thought you were!" Jiroubou taunted in a sarcastic fashion, even while his body was unable to move due to the fact that he was still captured in Shikamaru's shadow.

While Shikamaru held the enemy immobile, both Chouji and Haku had started preparing themselves for the offensive assault they were about to perform. Reaching into his side pocket, Chouji pulled out a strange container with three different coloured pills inside them. Delicately, he picked up the first, green pill (7) and popped in to his mouth before quickly snapping the container shut and stuffing it back into his pocket. Chouji then pulled out a long metal chain with multiple kunai attached every few centimetres along its length. The chain was then wrapped around Chouji's body in a criss-cross method. Once that was done, Chouji activated his family's traditional Jutsu – the Baika no Jutsu (Multi-size Technique). Suddenly, after Chouji's body expanded due to the Jutsu he had performed, the various kunai accessories were pointed outwards, creating a deadly combination when joined together with the spherical dimensions of Chouji's new body size and mass. "Nikudan Hari Sensha (Spiked Human Cannon Ball)!" Chouji yelled as he prepared to roll over their enemy. On the other hand, Haku had also performed his own Jutsu –

the Chakra Enjintou (Chakra Scalpel Technique), relying on his Medic Nin techniques instead of his traditional Ice or Water attacks.

When all preparations were done, both Chouji and Haku instantly launched into action, leaving Jiroubou feeling very apprehensive of what they were about to do as he, himself, was still unable to move an inch. Chouji rolled himself into a deadly spiked bowling ball heading straight towards Jiroubou, while Haku opted to attack from behind, waiting for a chance to act himself. Watching as Chouji continued to roll towards his enemy, Shikamaru shifted his own Shadow away at the very last moment before impact, leaving Jiroubou completely vulnerable to Chouji's attack.

A thunderous explosion erupted as Chouji's spiked body impacted against Jiroubou's surprised one. With his intense momentum, Chouji was actually able to force and drag Jiroubou's body several metres backwards. The force of the thrust created a large trench about thirty metres long, expanding from when the impact of the two forces met to where they finally settled, the massive amount of smoke and dust slowly cleared, revealing what had resulted from the collision of the two opponents.

In the middle of the clearing stood two people - one was Chouji (still in his spiked human ball shape) and the other was Jiroubou, though slightly hurt, the man still stood tall and domineering. The two were unmoving; two solid objects obstructing each other's way, even while a small dribble of blood patted onto the ground between them. However their fortunes were about to change. Jiroubou had activated his first stage of the curse seal, which was why strange black, spade-like chain tattoos started appearing across his face, chest and left arm. Haku cursed under his breath. "Shit. A curse seal!"

"A what?" Shikamaru asked while watching his friend intently, also wondering about their enemy's strange appearance.

"It's a curse seal, probably created by Orochimaru. It can grant its user enormous power but at a price. For each time they use it, they are actually decreasing their life span because the curse seals (while

granting huge amounts of chakra by forcing it out of the body) it also corrodes the body as time goes on." Haku explained, having already studied the various curse seals in the village medical library. He never thought that he would actually be a witness of these curse seal's power though. Not in a million lifetimes. This was why he would always be grateful to Zabuza. Though Zabuza had always attempted to turn Haku into a human weapon, he had never gone so far as to place a curse seal onto the boy, and that was proof enough of his affections.

Bringing his attention back to the fight at hand, Haku was pulled out of his musings when Jiroubou suddenly slammed his open palm into Chouji's body while shouting out his move: "Houshou! (Crushing Fist)" The vibrations rocked by Jiroubou's palm against Chouji's stomach, reverberating through out the poor boy's entire body, before the actual force of the punch finally pushed the boy off his feet, into the air, dispelling his Baika no Jutsu so that Chouji returned to his normal body size, as he landed roughly onto the hard ground. The string of kunai fell some distance away from their owner and master.

"CHOUJI!" Shikamaru yelled in fright even while he ran after his friend, to check on his well being.

Not waiting for Jiroubou to continue his assault, Haku quickly ran after the enemy. Using his speed to his advantage, Haku twisted and dodged Jiroubou's clumsy attempts at hitting him with his powerful punches and slams with ease. Twirling on his feet, Haku twisted away from one more attempt at punching him before re-righting himself behind his enemy. "Chakra Enjintou! (Chakra scalpel)" Haku muttered under his breath even while he moved his hands to tap gently onto specific important yet vulnerable areas within the human body. Startled, Jiroubou clumsily swung back his forearm, forcing Haku to drop his assault and jump backwards to avoid being hit. That was when Jiroubou finally noticed that his arm moved sluggishly, as if something were wrong.

"Heh. I've cut the main Brachial artery (8) in your arm. You'll find that you're currently suffering from internal bleeding and won't be able to use your arm very well at all." Haku muttered in a low voice, slowly but surely returning to his Hunter Nin persona from the days where he had fought and killed just to survive. No matter how much Haku had changed since becoming a Medical Ninja, he was still a true Ninja at heart. When the need arose, he could and would kill as ruthlessly as he had always killed under the guidance of Zabuza. Though it would be disadvantageous to use any of his ice or water attacks here in the dry atmosphere of the Fire country, Haku could still use his deadly Medical knowledge to his advantage.

"WHY YOU LITTLE!" Jiroubou roared as he took one step forward, towards Haku, and promptly fell onto his knees. It was rather comical watching his eyes go wide in shock, as he couldn't feel his legs under him at all, let alone control their movement.

"Oh. I forgot to tell you. I've also severed your Aorta (9) artery from your lower spine downward. You'll find that your legs won't be responding to you either as there is no more blood running into the system of veins and arteries below that point." Haku replied coldly even while he raised three of his gripped Senbon (long metal needles); ready to strike down the enemy's heart if he even moved a centimetre. Haku was in his element, with the Senbon as his favourite weapon of choice, his medical knowledge giving him an edge over most if not all opponents coupled with his ruthless and cold manner at slaying enemies when the need arose. He would kill without regret, but it was not for pleasure. No. He got no pleasure from killing, but it was necessary. Naruto had taken him from that cold life of killing and shown him how he could live in the leaf, and for that he would protect the village and the people within it.

Desperate, and a little fearful for his life, Jiroubou had no choice but to release the curse seal to level two. The patches of black triangle patterns across his face grew in size and numbers until they slowly consume his entire face and body. Jiroubou's short orange hair grew at an exponential rate, coinciding with the power of the curse seal

level two. Huge pimples and lumps grew from Jiroubou's forehead and arms. His skin darkened into a reddish earth tint. His face deformed slightly with larger cheekbones and roundish jaw and chin (muzzle like?). Fingernails grew longer until they resembled a cat's claws. But the most notable change was his eyes – yellow irises surrounded by black. They were the eyes of a monster.

Haku stood, shocked into immobility. / *WHAT the hell IS he?!* / This was the only notable thought going through Haku's mind while he watched the transformation in amazement.

An interesting thing about the level two curse seal that not many people knew of, was that it allowed for any injuries or wounds that had been inflicted upon the user to be healed once the transformation was complete. Indeed, not many people knew of this interesting fact, including Haku, who was finding it rather difficult to swallow as Jiroubou started standing up onto his feet without any problems. It seems that while the huge surge of chakra was implementing the changes to Jiroubou's original body, it had also healed or re-aligned any misplaced, cut, or injured areas within the human body as well as outside of it. This fact caused a considerable dent in Haku's plan of killing the enemy swiftly and silently. (10)

Taking another step forward, Jiroubou suddenly bent forward and rushed towards Haku at an alarming speed. It took all of Haku's wits and experience to dodge the dangerous crush of Jiroubou's palm as the man slammed his palm onto the ground, narrowly missing the boy, creating a gigantic crater with a diameter of about eight metres. "Asshou. (Pressure Palm)" Jiroubou replied calmly even while he turned around to face the boy once more. However, before he could take another step forward, Jiroubou found himself (for the third time) captured within Shikamaru's shadow even while the spiky haired boy struggled to keep the man from moving. Shikamaru stood at the edge of the crater, standing behind Jiroubou so the man hadn't detected him while his attentions were riveted to Haku.

"Haku-san! Hurry and heal Chouji up first. We need Chouji to win this battle." Shikamaru ordered, even though sweat was dribbling down

his face in an uncharacteristic manner as a sign of how pressured he was feeling at the moment.

"Ha... Hai." Haku numbly muttered as he rushed off towards the injured boy at the edge of the clearing.

Jiroubou raised his yellow glaring eyes onto the Chuunin vested Leaf Shinobi. "Do you really think you can hold ME, boy? I'll rip you apart once your stupid Jutsu runs out of steam!" The man threatened in a deep, almost growling voice that showcased his more demonic appearance rather than his once human-likeness.

"Heh. We'll see about that." Even though sweat was literally running down Shikamaru's face, he still forced himself to exert a bit of chakra to try and attempt his next Jutsu. "Kage Kubishibari no Jutsu! (Shadow Neck Bind Technique!)" Shikamaru called out, while a strange shadow form stretched its way from Jiroubou's own shadow and started climbing up the legs of said man. Despite the fact that the extra shadow filaments had formed a strange sort of claw-like hand and slowly running its course towards Jiroubou's neck, trying to wrap its formative fingers around said neck and strangle Jiroubou, Shikamaru was finding it VERY difficult to control and manipulate the shadow appendage. There was just too much chakra being exuded by Jiroubou's changed body and curse seal. It was hampering Shikamaru in his attempts at killing Jiroubou, and as such, was also causing Shikamaru to use up his chakra too fast. If this kept on going, Shikamaru would eventually run out of chakra to even hold Jiroubou in place. */ Haku! HURRY! I can't keep this up forever. /* Shikamaru thought to himself frantically.

At the side of the clearing, Haku was rapidly healing Chouji as fast as possible, and he couldn't help but worry about Shikamaru with that monster. In Jiroubou's new form, there was no way that Shikamaru could defeat him on his own. He needed help and fast or else this could get bloody.

Slowly, Shikamaru's shadow appendage started to recede from Jiroubou's body. Shikamaru just couldn't find a way to fight and win

against the massive amount of Chakra being emitted by Jiroubou's curse seal. There was just no way around the matter. Watching as the shadows slowly travel back down to join their original shadow under his feat, Jiroubou gave the boy a sardonic smirk, as if showing that he knew exactly what was going on, and that he will ultimately win in the end.

Unexpectedly, Shikamaru's Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Imitation Technique) suddenly broke apart as Jiroubou released a sudden surge of Chakra just to battle off the Jutsu. Finally freed from the binding technique, Jiroubou wasted no time in launching himself at the annoying Shadow boy, deciding that he would kill this one first and foremost before he killed the others. After all, without the leader and one who had such an irritating technique, the others would be easy to kill.

"SHIKAMARU!" Chouji yelled, as he pushed away from Haku, struggling to stand up run towards his friend in danger.

"No, Chouji! You won't make it!" Haku's scream was not heeded as the once chubby boy ran and stumbled his way towards the fight that was happening in the middle of the clearing.

In his new curse seal level two form, Jiroubou had enhanced power and speed; he jumped his way out of his previously created crater towards Shikamaru. Knowing that there simply was not enough time for the boy to dodge or runaway from his attack, Jiroubou readied his fist in order to perform another Asshou (Pressure Palm) on the annoying brat, once and for all ending his existence. Shikamaru, however, shocked all three members in the clearing by standing perfectly still, as if waiting for the attack to come.

"Shikamaru! RUN!!!" Chouji's shout seemed to fall on deaf ears as Shikamaru continued to stay on the same spot.

It was at the very last second, when Jiroubou was only a few feet above Shikamaru's head that the boy's hands suddenly flew, performing a short set of seals, resulting in him 'falling' or

disappearing directly into the shadow under his feet - the same shadow that was enlarged by Jiroubou's bulky form directly on top of him. Unnoticed by both Jiroubou and Chouji before hand, Shikamaru had already placed one of his teleportation kunai directly underneath his body, and in between his feet, right in the centre of his own human shadow.

"Phew! That was just too close for comfort! God, this is so troublesome." A nasal and tired voice unexpectedly rang out from behind Haku, and Chouji instantly turned around to gaze (with some tears in his eyes) at Shikamaru's unexpected form leaning against a shadowed tree trunk, where another one of his kunai was attached.

"Shi... Shikamaru." Chouji could only mummer in relief, even while he wiped away some of the stray tears that had fallen from his eyes.

Shikamaru gave him a weary grin. "I'm not gonna die that easily, Chouji. Don't worry about me." He replied, and Chouji could only nod, still not strong enough to talk without stuttering at the thought of losing his best friend.

"DAMN YOU F###KING BRATS!!! I'LL CRUSH ALL OF YOU LIKE ANTS!!!" Jiroubou roared his displeasure at having his quarry escape him AGAIN.

"Okay, guys. Let's kill this guy once and for all." Shikamaru warned both Chouji and Haku in a serious manner.

"Yeah. Let's do it." Haku confirmed while pulling out his previously unused senbon (long metal needles) and getting into a battle stance, ready for anything the enemy will through at them.

"Hn." Chouji grunted, even as he pulled the special container of pills out of his pocket again. This time, opening the middle casing, he pulled out the yellow pill. Without looking back at Shikamaru's frightened gaze, Chouji quickly dropped the pill into his mouth and crushed it with his teeth. This was not the time to hold anything back. The fight must be finished, now.

Jiroubou rushed towards the three boys, this time, not caring how much damage he caused as long as he KILLED those annoying, irritating children. He was too frustrated to really think about what he was doing, and he was too far beyond furious to care what the consequences were. He had given into his anger and as such, wasn't paying enough attention to his opponents as well as underestimating them. This was a fatal mistake that would almost cost him his life.

With the yellow pill eaten and digested, Chouji felt a huge surge of Chakra within himself and felt as though he could take on the world in protection of his friend. Without waiting for a signal from Shikamaru, Chouji, started running towards Jiroubou with a fiery gleam in his eyes. Shikamaru and Haku, watching as Chouji launch himself against their enemy front on, decided to attack from the sidelines. Shikamaru to the left and Haku to the right, the coordination between the two of them was perfect, as they both threw several weapons of their own choice (Haku used Senbon, Shikamaru used kunais) at the enemy at exactly the same time. Even though both weapons did absolutely nothing towards injuring the enemy as Jiroubou's skin had become hardened and strong enough to withstand those common weapons, they still distracted the man long enough for Chouji to ram head long into Jiroubou, knocking the man slightly off his feet before pushing him backwards by the force of momentum.

Changing his direction abruptly, Haku charged at the Sound Nin's unprotected back while performing the hand seals for the medical technique of Chakra Enjintou (Chakra Scalpel) again. Reaching the place directly behind the enemy, Haku hastily dropped down to his hunches and hurriedly struck the back of Jiroubou's shin and calf bones (Tibia and Fibula) (11). Immediately after cutting the bones, Haku swung his body around in an arc, stretching one of his legs out wide, and swiftly snapped it against Jiroubou's vulnerable legs, knocking the man off his feet.

With Jiroubou's full weight lifted off of his shoulder for a short amount of time due to the man falling onto his own knees, Chouji concentrated all of his enormous chakra into the palm of his hand. "Bubun Baika no Jutsu! (Partial Multi-size Technique)" Chouji yelled as the fist of his hand enlarged into an abnormal size, with his entire massive store of Chakra visible focused just into his hand.

Struggling onto his feet, even with the healing abilities of the curse seal level two, Jiroubou found it difficult and painful to put weight on his two broken legs. But he'd be damned if he was going to be defeated by three pathetic Konoha Genins, and children at that. This was a matter of pride; the pride of the Sound Four.

Shikamaru quickly took advantage of the situation, and created another Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Imitation technique) to force Jiroubou from moving at all from the very spot that he had struggled to stand. Even though he knew that the Kagemane no Jutsu wouldn't be able to hold Jiroubou for long, a few seconds were enough for all of them to pull off one last assault that would guarantee their victory. Once Chouji was ready to strike Jiroubou with all he had, Shikamaru hurriedly released the Jutsu, leaving Jiroubou to face the wrath of Chouji alone.

Chouji slammed his enlarged fist right into Jiroubou's stomach, forcing the man to throw up a lot of blood onto Chouji's face and clothes as he grappled with the pain of being punched in the gut by such a massive attack. And now, as a finishing touch, Haku jumped and somersaulted until he was directly above Jiroubou's body. Quickly performing a seal which he hadn't used in ages, Haku called forth one of his most deadly techniques that he had forbidden himself to use due to the 100 percent guarantee of death. "Hyotenshin no Jutsu (Frozen Heart Attack)!" (12) Landing not so gently onto Jiroubou's back, Haku slammed his own palm directly between the shoulder blades and above the throbbing heart that Haku was so lethally aiming for.

Shocked into silence, both Chouji and Shikamaru pulled away from the unmoving body of Jiroubou, while Haku jumped away from his

victim, landing softly on the ground. They watched as the man slowly crumbled down onto himself, his face in a suspended state of shock. "It's done." Haku whispered. It was pretty obvious that the man was finally dead, especially when the cursed seal slowly reverted back, leaving Jiroubou in his original human form.

After a long pause in silence, in which both Shikamaru and Chouji gave respect to the dead, Shikamaru finally spoke up, remembering what had to be done. "Alright. We're finished here. Let's go." He mumbled, mentally forcing himself to turn away from the corpse of a man he had help kill. That was when Chouji suddenly collapsed onto his knees. "Chouji!" Alarmed, both Haku and Shikamaru ran towards Chouji's position.

Laying the pained boy down, Haku quickly assessed the situation and tried his best to heal whatever damage that was caused by the consumption of those deadly pills of the Akimichi clan. "Come on, Chouji! You're gonna be alright!" Shikamaru shakily gripped his best friend's hand, hoping against hope that the boy would be okay and mentally praying to any god in existence to keep the boy alive. After surviving that monster he was not going to lose Chouji.

"Yeah." Chouji grunted, even while his eyes squinted in pain and he gritted his teeth in an effort NOT to scream out loud.

After a few tense minutes of constant healing, Haku finally let go of the boy's chest and crumbled backwards, leaning against the roots of a giant tree. "I did my best. But it's not enough." Haku admitted tiredly. "There's just too much damage. I've halted the corrosive cells from doing any more than they already have, but... you have to go back to the hospital. And even then, I don't know whether there's anyone there with the expertise to be able to heal you completely. If Tsunade-sama were here, then maybe she could do it. But... this is all I can do... I'm sorry." Haku murmured apologetically, knowing that only the legendary Sannin, in which he had heard of in the medical books, had that kind of power although she was nowhere to be found.

"That's okay." Chouji gasped out, even while he continued to breathe heavily. "Let me catch my breath first and I'll walk myself back to Konoha. You two have to catch up to the others quickly."

"There's no way I'm leaving you here by yourself in so much pain. I'll go with you. It would be just too troublesome to have you not make it." Shikamaru insisted, using his favourite word to cover up his worry.

"Shikamaru!" Chouji rebuffed. "You're the squad leader!" He reminded the Chuunin. "Our mission was to bring back Sasuke. And I refuse to return home a failure just because you're too worried to go after what's important." The pained boy argued, happy that Shikamaru was worried but also knowing the probability of success was greater if Shikamaru went on. "I'm gonna be fine. I promise. Luckily, I haven't taken the red pill, so I could probably reach home sooner or later. But damn it! YOU ARE NOT ABANDONING YOUR MISSION! This is not the time or the place to say 'I quit'! Shikamaru! Please! Trust me. I'll be waiting for your return, I promise!" Chouji continued to insist, arguing each and every point, forcing Shikamaru to admit defeat.

Finally, after a long and tense argument, Shikamaru finally gave in. "You BETTER be okay, when I get back, Chouji. You hear!?" Shikamaru gave the boy a glare.

Chouji rolled his eyes at his best friend. "Yah, I promise. Now go!!!" He growled.

It was only after Shikamaru and Haku had disappeared into the foliage of the trees in the distance, that Chouji finally slumped against the giant tree trunk. "Gomen ne... Shikamaru... This is one promise I might not be able to keep." Chouji whispered to himself even while he smiled as he drifted off into unconsciousness. He was just too exhausted to really want to push himself all the way home, might as well take a short nap for the time being.

Unbeknownst to Chouji, a black clad figure had suddenly emerged onto the clearing where they had battled Jiroubou. The man was

completely wrapped in black clothing, had high combat boots on, and even his face was covered in bandages that only showcased a singular, emerald green eye. The man glanced back and forth between the unconscious boy and the seemingly dead man. With a click of his fingers, shadows erupted from beneath both figures. Like a warm night's presence, the shadows enveloped both the boy and the man's supposed corpse, slowly but surely, both combatants and the man faded from existence, leaving behind an empty clearing with only gigantic craters to signify that an intense battle had once been waged there.

(1) To be able to perform any of the Kage Michi (Way of the Shadow) Techniques that Kaga has been teaching Shikamaru, the shadows they use must be inherently 'neutral' or 'not being manipulated by something or someone else'. In Kaga's case, he often creates his own shadows from nothing (in mid air as a solid but thin form in and of itself). Because he is the one who created it, it belongs to him and therefore can only be manipulated by him. Shikamaru's case is different, he doesn't have the power to create shadows from nothing, but he can manipulate the shadows that are already present as long as others are not manipulating the shadow itself and its surroundings. In this particular case, Jiroubou has Chakra running continuously directly under the enclosed cave or even on the wall surface itself. This Chakra absorption ability is too close to the shadows that Shikamaru wants to manipulate. It's like putting some solid object on water (water current - something that is manipulated by others) instead of a flat surface (something which is inherently neutral and completely stable), if the object can float – it would ultimately float away, if it can't – it'll sink.

(2) This particular translation was copied from Anbu/AnimeOne episode 112. Inane called it the 'Meat Tank' technique but the Japanese translated name seems to be the same.

(3) Inane called it 'Mud Cannon Ball' while Anbu/AnimeOne just called it 'Mud Ball.'

(4) Here's a little hint of ShikamaruXIno. Well, I'm not sure about this pairing. I don't mind it, but am not sure whether it will be part of this story. Just one of the choices for pairings that I'd like to point out, if anyone's interested.

(5) I actually used the Chinese words for 'elongate', which is 'shen chang' and then went searching for the Japanese pronunciations of these two Chinese characters; with the end result being 'No' (Shen) Naga (Chang).

(6) This is just an explanation of the above Original Technique – Nonaga. It's exactly like how Asuma can elongate his own special knuckle blades by adding a layer of Chakra onto the blade. In this case, Ino was able to elongate the length of her sword to such an extent that she could literary cut the giant boulder in half. Scientifically, if you were to actually measure how long her blade had become within the split second of her actually forming it, it would probably be around five or more metres long.

(7) In the anime, it was a green 'spinach' pill. In the manga, it was 'blue' in colour. I'll stick with the anime version for now, because I think more people know it as green instead of blue. But for those devout manga fans, this is the reason why the pill was green and not blue.

(8) Found the name from an encyclopaedia. It's the main artery running next to the Humerus bone within the bicep muscles.

(9) Also found it from an encyclopaedia about the human body. It's the largest artery that runs from the heart directly down into the legs. Haku had cut it just before it splits into two smaller arteries at the bottom of the spine.

(10) Completely made up. In the manga (and anime probably) Kimimaro's level two curse seal didn't heal him from his injuries and neither did Sakon/Ukon. So I'm saving my ass here by saying that this particular 'gift' is completely MADE UP!!!

(11) Another one from the encyclopaedia, the tibia is the large bone within the calf of your legs while the fibula is the smaller one next to the tibia.

(12) Original Jutsu. Haku forces chakra from the palm of his hand into the victim's body, travelling through veins, arteries or muscle, the chakra then reaches the heart... and FREEZES it. The heart of the victim is therefore frozen or turned into an icicle. Without the constant thump of the heart, no blood is being pumped in the body and therefore, the body collapses and dies of suffocation.

Finally, Jiroubou is out of the picture now. I won't be spoiling the next chapter for you so you'll just have to see for yourself what changes I've added to the original plot. Anyway, I do hope you like this chapter. The fight scenes were very difficult for me to create because I DIDN'T want it to follow the Cannon series. And this was the result of HOURS of thinking. Once again, my muse had proven rebellious because it changed the entire sequence of fights at the very last moment before I finished writing.

Anyway, wish you all the best and keep on reviewing. Even if it is constructive criticism, it's welcomed. I know that the story isn't shaping up to be what I wanted it to be when I first started. So, it's all just a continuous process of trying to perfect it.

I'd also like to thank Cobra-100 and BigAzxDaddy99 for volunteering to be my new beta-readers. Please give them a praise of thanks.

One last thing before I finish my notes for this chapter!

I need a title for the third and final Arc in the Faith series.

I only have one stipulation – it must have the word 'Faith' in there somewhere!

As you all know, the first Arc in the series is called 'Faith in Humanity', followed by this second Arc called 'Restoration of Faith.' If anyone out there who have a very creative streak in 'titles', please

give me a three/four/five name title with one of the words being 'Faith'. Thank you all!

Pursuit III

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After the Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter 6: Pursuit III

"**Demon's talk**" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

"

" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Warning: PG-13. There are spoiler warnings for Book 22 onwards, and animation episodes 115 onwards. Um... a lot of swearing on behalf of Tayuya, but I think that's all, really. And there are a lot of scene jumps or point of view jumps near the end of the chapter.

I'm sorry that this chapter took practically a whole MONTH to write, I don't really have much of an excuse other than the fact that I was battling a powerful writer's block.

It was VERY DIFFICULT to write this chapter because I didn't really have much choice on HOW I could change the plot. Neji is Neji, and there's only so much I can change about him without making him completely different and unbelievable. However, I did (sort of) manage to give Tenten some screen time. I'm sorry for all those Tenten fans out there (if there are any of you out there) about the last chapter, I know I didn't really give her ANY role what so ever. So for

this chapter alone, she will be playing at least some important roles to make up for her 'muteness' in the previous chapter.

Anyway, sorry for the long wait, but because of this chapter's particularly difficult fight scenes, it took me a very long time to figure out how the fights will end up. And this is the final result. Hope you all like it. The upcoming chapters will be FAR more interesting, I promise.

Chapter 6

Kiba sniffed the air. "We're catching up to them." He concluded as he traced an abundance of the enemies' scent in the air, before narrowing his eyes in suspicion. "I'm surprised that we haven't met up with any traps yet." He growled in nervousness.

"They probably expected their other comrade to have already defeated us and left the path clear for that guy to return to them." Sakura paused in her explanation. Whilst she continued to follow in Kiba's careful footsteps, jumping from one tree branch to another, Sakura's mind was busy analysing and weighing their choices. "They're underestimating us. And we can use that to our advantage." She finally finished.

The others nodded, but it was Neji who spoke up, curious as to what Sakura planned to do once they caught up with their enemies. "So, what's the plan when we finally meet up with them?"

Sakura only gave him a small smirk in reply. "I'll tell you when we get there."

"He's bloody late, that fXXking Fatass!" Tayuya swore under her breath.

"Na... He's already here." Kidoumaru chuckled as Tayuya glared at him.

Behind the group, Jiroubou suddenly appeared, speeding up his pace to catch up to his irritated team members.

"About FXXking Time, you AXXHXXX!" Tayuya cursed, aggravated at having to wait for the weakest member of their team to arrive.

"Sorry." Jiroubou mumbled while he glanced from one member to the next, his gaze lingering at the barrel being held by Kidoumaru.

Tayuya flashed a suspicious look at Kidoumaru and Sakon after hearing Jiroubou's submissive reply. The two men immediately tilted their body so that they were facing their weakest member front on, while still travelling backwards towards their goal. "You're not Jiroubou!" Kidoumaru growled. He quickly released the large barrel that was strapped onto his back. "Tayuya! Take Sasuke-sama to Orochimaru-sama. I'll take care of this impostor!"

Tayuya grabbed onto the barrel with ease, even while she glared hatefully at the Jiroubou copy.

Swearing under his breath, Jiroubou pulled out a kunai from his back and aimed to slash Kidoumaru with it, since Kidoumaru was standing right in front of him, blocking his way from the others.

"Jiroubou would never accept such an insult from Tayuya. He'll definitely tell her not to swear so much and to watch her mouth." Kidoumaru sneered while he easily blocked Jiroubou's clumsy attempt at stabbing him.

"Really..." Jiroubou smirked. Unexpectedly, Jiroubou suddenly disappeared into a cloud of smoke.

"What the? A bunshin?" Kidoumaru whispered, his eyes wide with surprise. */ Impossible! I felt the impact of his arm being blocked by mine! ... But I didn't feel the kunai! /* Kidoumaru mentally thought to himself while he remained completely stumped at what kind of Jutsu was used to trick him. (1)

From behind the cloud of smoke that had once been the Clone, a shadowy object suddenly appeared. The object revealed itself to be a Windmill shuriken, spinning its way through the air with ease, surprising all three of the Sound Shinobis. Kidoumaru staggered back, desperately trying to avoid the sharp edges of the twisting projectile. He was successful in saving himself, but still suffered a slight cut on his chest when the shuriken slashed through his chest as he was staggering backwards. Behind him, Tayuya barely dodged the projectile as well, suffering a few sliced pieces of hair falling from her fringe. The large shuriken rotated on its own axis, after lunging at Tayuya, changing its course and heading towards Sakon, who was able to rebound it by thrusting his own kunai against the spinning object. Metal screamed against metal due to the impact of the kunai meeting the shuriken. In the end, it was the shuriken that was successfully forced into a redundant tree, leaving all three of the Sound Four team members huffing at the surprised attack.

With both Sakon and Tayuya (who still held the barrel in a death grip) distracted by the sudden appearance of the Windmill shuriken, it was easy for Kiba and Akamaru to launch themselves at the two preoccupied Shinobis, attacking them from behind. "GATSUUGA! (Piercing Fang!)" Kiba yelled as he spun himself into a human drill, aiming directly at the woman who held Sasuke captive within the barrel.

"TAYUYA! SAKON! BEHIND YOU!" Kidoumaru warned, who was the first to notice the Leaf Nins as he had been facing his two teammates when Kiba and Akamaru's suddenly appeared. He quickly summoned forth Chakra into the veins of his mouth before launching off his own offensive attacks against the two identical boys. "Ninpou: Kumo Shibari!" (Ninja Arts: Spider Web Bind) (3) Spitting twice, two large spider webs were spun forth from Kidoumaru's mouth, slapping against the forms of Kiba and Akamaru, forcing them backwards, away from Sakon and Tayuya until finally the two boys were slammed against two large tree trunks and were attached to them indefinitely. Soon after that, Akamaru returned to its original form while Kiba swore at their lost chance.

"What the hell are you WAITING FOR? Go! Tayuya! Sakon! I'll handle these little SXXTs myself!" Kidoumaru yelled at his teammates. He glared at them before turning his attentions back to the many Leaf Nins whom still remained hidden from his sight.

"Shut up! You AXXHXXX! We're MOVING already!" Tayuya growled, annoyed at having almost been hit by a little runt and then having Kidoumaru, of all people, scold her. She just wasn't having a very good day at all. Turning around towards their destination, both Tayuya and Sakon easily moved off, leaving the newly established battlefield to Kidoumaru to handle. Swearing under her breath, Tayuya couldn't help but curse their missing team member for his failed promises. "FXXK! THAT FXXKING Jiroubou! Where the FXXK is that AXXHXXX! When I get my hands on him, that FATASS is SO DEAD!" Continuing to swear, both figures disappeared into the trees, leaving their third member behind.

Narrowing his eyes in the direction of the shadows among the trees, Kidoumaru calmly called out. "'Come out! Come out!' Said the Spider to the Fly!" He taunted, shifting his body in readiness.

Instantly, three Leaf Konoichis (female ninja) launched themselves out of the surrounding foliage. Sakura threw several Senbon (metal needle) at the six armed sound nin, while Ino threw several normal shuriken, leaving Tenten to throw several Kunai aimed directly at Kidoumaru. The gate guardian quickly jumped off the branch he was standing on, missing the Senbon flying his way. He landed then rapidly pushed off the side of a giant tree, narrowly escaping the shuriken. For the last obstacle - the oncoming Kunai, he released forth several fine strings similar to those of spider webs, swinging himself in the opposite direction; Kidoumaru was able to dodge the Kunai easily. Seeing that all three of their tactics had not worked against their enemy, all three girls – Sakura, Ino and Tenten, jumped off their own perspective tree branches, aiming towards their enemy.

Cutting off his hanging strings and landing on near by branch, Kidoumaru spun forth a large amount of white, slimy substance from his mouth before quickly moulding the technique using his hands in

preparation for his own assault. "Ninpou: Kumo Soukai!" (Ninja Arts: Spider Web Opening) (4) Releasing his Jutsu, Kidoumaru suddenly created a giant spider web, effectively trapping all three of the girls as they literally ran into the trap without any chance of escaping its path.

Finding themselves in dire predicament, all three of the girls tried desperately to escape the web that entrapped them, using whatever weapons that were at their disposal. In this case, Sakura and Tenten both used Kunai, while Ino tried using her valuable sword to slice through the thin web-like strings. Surprised at their unsuccessful attempts, all three girls looked to one another in silent panic. Seeing this, Kidoumaru gave a sardonic laugh at their dilemma. "Hah! My web is unbreakable! It can even support two elephants without breaking!" He sneered.

Watching in glee as his prey continued to struggle against their bindings, Kidoumaru thought that he should really end the game fast as it was becoming more and more boring to simply watch them try to break free. "Heh. Let's end this now." Summoning forth more of those sticky substances from his mouth, Kidoumaru pulled out six long strange claw-shaped moulds out of his lips. With each mould held firmly within each hand, Kidoumaru easily cut the strings from his mouth with one effective bite. "Ninpou: Kumo Nenkin! (Ninja Arts: Spider Web adhesive hypha) (5)" Slowly but surely, the strange white moulds hardened into sharp, orange, grainy, short spears; each one deadly looking and dangerous for sure. "Now... Time for the spider to swallow the fly..." Kidoumaru taunted as he pulled back all three of his right arms. Ready himself, he then quickly released all three of the orange spikes at the three girls, which were closely followed quickly by the other three spikes that were held by Kidoumaru's left arm.

Soon, all six spikes were spinning through the air at rapid speeds, closing dangerously on the girls still trapped by huge web-like structure. Suddenly, Sakura called out in demand: "NOW, NEJI!"

Surprised at seeing the pink haired girl's suddenly serious face, Kidoumaru was almost a second too late in dodging his attacker from behind. Jumping downwards quickly, Kidoumaru twisted in midair to finally lay his eyes on the last of his opponents, a boy with long black hair and pale, almost translucent eyes.

Neji, though having missed his chance at getting in a direct attack on his unsuspecting opponent, was still close enough to twist his arm in mid air, stretching far enough to give a light tap against Kidoumaru's forearms as the sound nin pulled them up to defend himself. Already done with all the damage that he could inflict from his angle, Neji quickly rotated once again to land lightly against a large tree, supporting and balancing himself while he never took his eyes off his opponent.

The girls in the mean time, had successfully escaped their web imprisonment, and were all spread out in the clearing – Ino and Sakura had left to try and free Kiba and Akamaru while Tenten hurried to join her teammate in this battle, leaving the six strange hardened spikes to hang from tree stumps, branches or stuck on what's left of the web.

Gritting his teeth in anger at having been overcome, even though it was for a little while, Kidoumaru glared at all those who oppose him. "HOW THE HELL DID YOU GET OUT OF MY WEB?" He yelled in fury as he clutched his slightly damaged right arm, due to Neji's light tap.

"I've analysed your web strings even before we attack in the first place. I found out the secret of your Jutsu is due to the strength and the stickiness of the web, which is made by mixing your own bodily fluids with Chakra. The Chakra is forever flowing within the intricate maze of lines and veins that makes up the web strings. This level of Jutsu is really impressive." Neji calmly explained. "However, what is made from Chakra can easily be destroyed by simply pouring a foreign Chakra into it. Your technique is useless against my 'Jyuuken' (Gentle Fist) style." Neji concluded without ever twitching his emotionless face.

Switching his gaze from the infernal boy towards the three girls now standing behind him, Kidoumaru continued to glare. "Then how the hell did they..." Here, he indicated the girls with a nudge of his chin. "... get out of my web."

This time, it was Sakura who answered. "As Neji said, we all already have an idea as to what your Jutsus could do, and so, we also knew of its weaknesses. Even though none of us can replicate Neji's Jyuuken style, but at the very least, we're also able to pour Chakra into certain objects. We trapped you into thinking that we were all captured, and then when the chance came, we poured our own Chakra into our weapons - whether it is Kunai, Senbon or Katana - before freeing ourselves from your trap. Chakra enhanced weapons can easily slice its way through your Chakra enhanced web." Sakura stated calmly, almost as if she were discussing the weather with a neighbour.

After a short time of intense silence, Neji decided to break it with his own suggestion. "We have to hurry or else we'll be too late to rescue Uchiha Sasuke. You all go on ahead. I'll take care of this guy and come after you when I'm done." Neji whispered to his team members calmly, never taking his eyes off his enemy.

A short whine from the small white dog alerted Kiba of the dangers of leaving Neji behind to deal with the dangerous Sound Nin. "Akamaru says that this guy is a lot stronger than the previous one. Are you sure you want to stay here alone?" He asked, concerned. Neji only nodded in return.

After a moment of thinking through the situation, Sakura finally made her decision. "Not alone, you don't. Neji, you and Tenten stay here and deal with him. Ino, Kiba, Akamaru and myself will go after Sasuke-kun. And when you're finished, come after us. And if you meet Shikamaru, Chouji and Haku-sensei on the way, tell them to meet us as well. I won't have any of you fight alone. We are a team; we support one another; that's the way of the leaf. Understand?" She ordered in a firm voice, receiving only nods of acknowledgement.

Without saying another word, Kiba, Akamaru, Ino and Sakura all turned around and jumped off their respective branches to chase after Sasuke once again, leaving Neji and Tenten behind to deal with the six armed freak of nature.

"Heh. You think I'm just gonna let you get away?" Kidoumaru remarked sarcastically, while he forced chakra to mould more of his web like substances out of his mouth, preparing to attack the Leaf Nins who are standing in his way.

Finished with moulding the Chakra enforced web, Kidoumaru quickly released three incredibly long streams of net like structures spanning out towards Neji's location and beyond.

"Tenten, behind me." Neji ordered and Tenten immediately followed. With his female teammate safely behind him, Neji stood firm and brought forth both his forearms to intercept the huge web structures that are being formed right in front of his Byakugan enhanced eyes. Having waited for the appropriate moment, Neji suddenly spun around from his stationed position, instantly cutting all the web strings with a simple brush of his finger tips.

"Heh. Pretty good... but not good enough." Kidoumaru taunted as he slowly started to get serious about these annoying Konoha pests.

Neji watched impassively as Kidoumaru summoned forth another batch of Chakra to mould more spider webs in and among his own mouth. "Tenten. I may need some assistance." At that statement, Tenten calmly walked out from behind her teammate and stood next to him instead, readying all her Chakra enhanced kunais and Shurikens just in case.

Not long after, Kidoumaru abruptly spat forth many small sized webs (about half the height of Neji and the same length), each going in a slightly different direction because Kidoumaru aimed to disable any of Neji's movements by trapping him to any of the near by trees. The girl wasn't much of a threat, in Kidoumaru's mind, mainly because he was never really interested in playing with girls, due to the fact they

often give up too easily and scream their heads off. However, that didn't mean that he would leave her untouched, he would bind her later, once the seemingly stronger male Shinobi was taken care of.

With so many web-like projectiles coming his way, Neji had found that with the speed in which he was slicing each and every one of the nets was being hampered by the sheer number of the enemy's traps. Eventually, he abandoned the thought of continuing to fight and decided to flee instead, dodging all of the web nets as best he could.

On the other hand, Tenten was fairing MUCH better than Neji was. Unlike Neji, who needed to wait until the nets were close enough for him to strike them with his bare hands, Tenten simply needed to throw a single Chakra enhanced kunai (2) towards the mesh net and it would easily slice through the web form as if it was made out of paper. And with Tenten being an expert in weapons handling as well as an ace with her aim, she was perfectly content with destroying all the traps before they came anywhere near her.

Unexpectedly, Neji was suddenly caught in one of the web nets and was forced backwards until he slammed hard onto the trunk of a tree. Seizing his chance, Kidoumaru quickly spat forth two more web nets onto Neji's arms, sticking them to the tree trunks as well.

Watching her partner being caught in one of the traps, Tenten instantly wanted to jump to Neji's rescue by flinging a few more kunais at her partner, hoping that they would cut through the web and set him free. But just before she was able to do that, she herself, having been preoccupied with her partner's dilemma, wasn't paying close enough attention to Kidoumaru as he had spat forth another web net towards her. Due to her being distracted, it was all too easy for Kidoumaru to entrap the girl in his web bind, the force of the net impacting against Tenten's body resulted in her slipping off her tree branch and falling downwards towards the ground.

"TENTEN!" Neji shouted in alarm as he watched his teammate fall. However, he still wasn't stupid enough to remove most of his

attention from observing his enemy.

Kidoumaru gave the boy a sardonic smirk, happy to have at least one of the pests dealt with while he took his time with this particular plaything. "You are a very talented Ninja, with especially sharp eyes, ain't cha?" He sneered. "From the Chakra openings in your hands, you can emit a sharp, needle like Chakra and cut through the thinnest part of my web-like Chakra with amazing precision. Unlike your teammate, who just composes a large amount of Chakra in each and every kunai, forcing its way through the entire web. It certainly slices the web in half neatly but it doesn't have any of the finesse you've displayed in your techniques."

Pausing a moment to gather his thoughts, Kidoumaru continued with his own thoughtful remarks. "Hmp. I've heard of this famous 'Jyuken style' from Orochimaru-sama. However, once I disable your annoying hands, you're no longer a threat to me. Now, it's time for you to die." He finished before gathering more Chakra into his mouth, only to open it a moment later and release a very long strip of Chakra web, flying directly towards Neji. "Kumo Nenkin!" (Spider Web adhesive hypha)

The orange substance that ran all the way from Kidoumaru's mouth towards Neji began to slowly harden as it sliced through the air, aiming directly at its victim, the trapped Neji. However, to Kidoumaru's eternal surprise, Neji suddenly shifted up his chest and snapped all of the web bindings that had once trapped him, without ever having to use his hands. The boy was just in time in freeing himself so that he could dodge the Sound Nin's Jutsu attack. Twisting upwards, Neji performed a neat flip before landing and running along Kidoumaru's own attack – the now hardened orange long pole – running at top speed towards his enemy and to finish the fight off once and for all.

Jumping off the pole and landing directly in front of Kidoumaru, Neji stood forth in his traditional Hyuuga Jyuken style stance. "Your greatest mistake was to underestimate me. It's not only my hands... I am able to emit Chakra from any part of my body." Neji confirmed

before narrowing his eyes in further concentration. "Now. Let the games... end. Jyuuken Hou: Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou! (Gentle Fist Style: Divinity Sixty Four strike)" With that said, Neji instantly launched into his attack.

"Two Strike!"

"Four Strike!"

"Eight Strike!"

"Sixteen Strike!"

"Thirty Two Strike!"

"Sixty Four Strike!"

As the assault continued Kidoumaru was forced backwards by the pinpoint attacks on his body, until his back slammed into a thick tree trunk and even that didn't really stop his momentum, as Neji's strikes eventually forced him all the way *through* the tree. Falling through the hole that was created by the impact of his back against the tree, Kidoumaru plummeted all the way towards the ground some fifty metres underneath.

Watching from his perch high up in the trees, Neji frowned as his Byakugan eyes told him that Kidoumaru wasn't completely defeated yet. Deciding to get a closer look at what had happened, Neji jumped after the Sound Nin, landing lightly on his feet atop the moist forest ground, glaring at Kidoumaru's slightly disfigured form emerging through the smoke and dust.

"What the..." Neji frowned in surprise and annoyance. Kidoumaru seemed to be perfectly in tact behind his strange orangey hardened armour, something that reminded him of Gaara's armour of sand. "Golden Skin?" Neji whispered to himself. Slowly but surely, the orange armour cracked and splintered, shattering onto the ground with loud cracking sounds. Analysing the substance with his

Byakugan, Neji was able to determine that it was made out of the same thing as the previous web nets.

"Well. That was certainly dangerous. If I had taken a single hit from that Jyuuken attack, my Chakra network would have been damaged, which would prevent me from using my Chakra. It was a damn close call." Kidoumaru smirked at Neji's annoyed expression, and his eyes focused as he tried not make another mistake. "Heh. Let me explain to you, boy! My Kumo Nenkin (Spider Web Adhesive Hypha) is a type of metal that instantly hardens when it comes out of my body. It can also prevent all Chakra from getting through itself. Another thing you know about my Kumo Nenkin... is that not only can it come out of my mouth, it can also be formed from my sweat glands." Kidoumaru concluded confidently sneering at the boy's dismay.

Both combatants paused slightly, each one analysing the other's abilities and trying to decipher the best way to win. Due to both of their deep concentrated states, both Neji and Kidoumaru jumped at the sudden appearance of Tenten, whom had previously freed herself from her spider's bind a long time ago but decided to watch the proceedings of the fight instead of jumping head first into battle. Neji gave Tenten a small, relieved smile, signalling that he was glad she wasn't hurt before both their attentions shifted back onto their immediate enemy. However, in their short split second of distraction, Kidoumaru had quickly moved away and hidden himself in the nearby bushes.

I My Kumo Shibari (Spider Bind) won't work on either of them. The boy could slice them easily with his hands, and the girl could always use her Chakra enhanced kunais. I also can't engage in close hand combat due to that guy's Jyuuken style. However, I'm not sure whether I can defeat them by using long-range attacks either. That girl have shown that she has an incredibly large number of kunais and shurikens strapped onto her body, she's probably some kind of weapons specialist, and as such, have a high probability of being good at long-range attacks. SHIT. The both of them together have

got each other covered; both short-range and long-range attacks will probably bounce off their combined efforts. Damn... But shit! I can't give up. I'll just have to work on them until I find a weakness in both their guards! / Kidoumaru thought to himself frantically.

Deciding to try out his theory, Kidoumaru systematically set up a huge list of various traps all hidden among the trees of the forest. Each trap was set up in such a way that by releasing just one singular spider web string, Kidoumaru was able to discharge over fifty or so of his Kumo Nenkin (Spider Web Adhesive Hypha) spikes at the two Konoha Genins. Once the traps were set up, it was show time.

Waiting in anticipation for their enemy's next move, Neji sudden yelled out to his female teammate: "Tenten, go up. I'll tell you when and where to strike!" Though not completely understanding what he meant, Tenten still managed to follow orders, trusting Neji to plan out the best way for them to deal with their opponent. Running up a near by tree, Tenten flipped backwards, rebounding off another tree, only to realise that she had just managed to dodge several sharp orange spikes on her way up. Jumping, dodging and hiding among the trees, Tenten quickly reached backwards into her pouch to pull out of her weapon's scrolls, ready and waiting for Neji's signal.

On the other hand, Neji, having already sent Tenten up among the trees and safely away from most of the flying projectiles coming his way, prepared himself to perform the Kaiten. "Hakkeshou: Kaiten (Hand of the Eight Divinations: Heavenly Spin)!" Easily deflecting all of the spikes that came his way, Neji ended his spin, leaving a rather large crater directly underneath his feet.

/ WHAT THE FXXK! Does he have eyes on the back of his head? And that Defence! Blocking physical attacks with just his Chakra! / Unfortunately for Kidoumaru, he didn't have enough time to ponder the Leaf Nin's unique abilities. Having deciphered Kidoumaru's likely location, Neji instantly launched a Kunai in his direction, of which, Kidoumaru had to quickly duck in order to safely avoid the weapon.

"Tenten!" Neji yelled, signalling to his partner that it was time for her to start attacking.

Reacting immediately to Neji's command, Tenten launched herself from her hidden placement behind a tree and quickly released the string holding the scroll closed. Opening the long scroll while she twisted in and among the air between trees, Tenten rapidly activated her Jutsus. With each snap of her hand or fingers against the words written on the scroll, weapons were instantly summoned forth. Grabbing each weapon and throwing them in the direction of where Neji had just flung his own kunai, Tenten now found herself to be the first offensive line against their enemy, hurling all her Chakra enhanced weapons at Kidoumaru with little to no mercy what so ever.

Having caught sight of the hundreds of various weapons coming his way, Kidoumaru had no choice to be run, jump, and duck, do anything to dodge and miss the girl's weapons as best he could. He didn't even have enough time to summon forth any of his Kumo Shibari (Spider Web Bind) or Kumo Soukai (Spider Web Opening) to defend himself from the mass attack.

Once Tenten had ran out of weapons to throw at her opponent, she landed lightly onto the moist forest ground once again, in her hand the empty scroll drifted softly onto the earth. "Neji?" She questioned, but the boy only shook his head in answer. Knowing what he meant to say, Tenten frowned slightly at having all her weapons miss hitting the Sound Nin completely. She was rather disappointed in herself, even though she was at a disadvantage at the time, considering she couldn't see where her prey was, while he knew exactly where she was. It was a disappointment for her because she wanted to show Neji that she could do something important.

Having escaped the weapon specialist's barrage of flying projectiles, Kidoumaru hid himself behind a cluster of trees, assuming that he was far away enough to avoid the Hyuuga's eyes. Gritting his teeth in frustration, Kidoumaru narrowed his eyes in anger. All of his

previous assumptions had been right. The girl really was a weapon's specialist, specialising in long-distance attacks; while the boy was obviously a close-hand combatant, Taijutsu master with his Jyuuken (Gentle Fist) style. Because of his raging emotions, Kidoumaru had unconsciously activated the curse seal level one on his body. The seal's strange swirling markings slowly wrapped itself around half of Kidoumaru's face, arms, torso, and leg. It wasn't until he felt the massive upsurge in Chakra from within his body that Kidoumaru even noticed that he had already activated the curse seal. / *Well. Looks like it's time to go to round 2!* / Kidoumaru smirked evilly to himself. / *Let's get the party started!* /

Out of the blue, Kidoumaru decided to reveal himself to the Konoha Ninjas, hanging up side down from four of his delicate looking spider strings, the tattoos of the curse seal completely visible on his face, arms and legs. Quite shocked by his sudden appearance, Tenten hadn't had enough time to act upon the chance to attack yet, before Kidoumaru had quickly bit his thumb to draw out some blood and finished his own set of seals. With two of his six hands he created a small spider web in between and another pair of hands doing the seals, Kidoumaru finally slammed one of his seal hands onto the web and called forth his technique: "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! (Summoning no Jutsu!)" Instantly, a giant spider rode on top of a massive web, on which Kidoumaru seemed to be happily riding, both of them hanging upside down compared to the Leaf Nins on the ground.

Surprised at the enormity of the summoned spider, both Neji and Tenten tensed in nervousness and agitation. However, they both decided to watch first and analyse before jumping straight into the fight. The spider, as if knowing that her enemies would not attack her as of yet, started to use this time to spin out a large cocoon from the back of her abdomen through the 'spinnerets' (6). Creating another one of his Kumo Nenkin (Spider Web Adhesive Hypha) spikes, Kidoumaru jumped off his spider and stabbed a large rip across the strange-cocooned object. Instantly, hundreds of smaller and yet

identical copies of the giant spider climbed out of the hole upon the cocooned substance and reacted to their summoner's demands by making their way across to their enemy, namely, the Leaf Nins.

Shrieking at the hundreds of small (but still incredibly large compared to the common spider) replicas swinging their way, Tenten visibly flinched at the multitudes of creepy crawlies. It wasn't that she was terribly afraid of these eight-legged insects; on the contrary, she's nowhere near as arachnophobic compared to some of the other girls in her Academy class. However, that didn't mean that she had to like them either. Like many of her female companions, insects just weren't her friends and she would usually do her best to avoid them. In this case, where 'avoidance' was pretty much impossible, Tenten would do better if she simply destroyed them, which was exactly what she intended to do.

"Neji! Let me handle this!" Tenten growled, suddenly very angry at having been forced into these unsightly situations. From her trusty Ninja pouch, Tenten pulled out another scroll, this time, it was a smaller, black scroll compared to the ones she had used before. Acknowledging what Tenten was about to do, Neji quickly jumped to the side to avoid any of Tenten's barrages when it came, as well as doing his best to be rid of the spiders before they could get anywhere near his partner.

Biting her thumb to draw out blood, Tenten unrolled the small black scroll, while consecutively smudging her bleeding thumb across the scroll of words, before re-rolling it up to its original form, grabbing it and performing a few seals with the scroll still in hand (7). "Ninpou Kuchiyose: Kinzoku no ame! (Ninjutsu Technique Summoning: Metallic Rain!)" (8) Throwing the small scroll up high into the air, it suddenly exploded creating a large smoke cloud that covered the area above her. Emerging from the cloud instantly were hundreds of weapons, sizes ranging from a few centimetres to full metre-lengths. The varieties of weapons include kunais, short swords, senbons, shurikens and more. The rain of weapons (9) flew through the air in elegant arches before plummeted forth onto the ground, each one

precisely Chakra enhanced to the point of being 'Chakra-seeking' weapons. Because they were 'Chakra-seeking' weapons, they automatically attack anything with a high degree of Chakra upon a 15-metre radius of Tenten's own location. This was the reason why Neji had to quickly move away is he didn't want to be targeted in the first place.

Within only a few seconds of releasing her Jutsu, all the surrounding spider creatures within a 15-metre radius of Tenten's current location were incapacitated; all killed on the spot by weapons piercing their very bodies. Further away from her, Neji was also handling his own problem by performing his newly learnt Jyuuken move – Hakke Hyaku Nijuu Hachi Shou (Divine 128 strikes) (10). Having already learnt that he couldn't stop the spiders using his Kaiten, due to the sticky webs that were spun forth from their backs, stopping his movements, Neji had decided that what he really needed to do was to strike each and every one of the spider miniatures by hand. Though tedious, this attacking motion seemed to work.

Seeing that most of his originally summoned spiders were practically gone, Kidoumaru silently commanded the mother spider to birth more spider armies to fight. With the numbers of spiders practically doubled or even tripled, Neji slowly but surely felt the pressure mounting because he just couldn't keep up. Even Tenten, who had performed seal after seal, lifting her summoned weapons off the ground to attack again and again at the oncoming army of spiders, was feeling her own body's Chakra depleting at a very rapid state. She wasn't dangerously low at the moment but with the rate of attacks increasing, she would be very soon.

"Damn! There are just too many of them!" Tenten practically yelled out the obvious. Neji too, had known a while ago that there was no way he could keep up with the increased assaults either. A few of the spider strings had already found its way and wrapped up upon his body, no matter how hard he tried, there were simply too many for the both of them to handle.

Suddenly, a barrage of Kumo Nenkin (Spider Web Adhesive Hypha) spikes were thrown from various angles among the trees, aiming for both Neji and Tenten, even while the spiders continued with their assaults. Neji instantly reacted by breaking the webs that held him and still managed to dodge the spikes coming his way. Tenten, on the other hand, wasn't as lucky. By the time the spikes were all gone, Tenten had suffered a rather deep gash on her left arm (just above her elbow), another one on her right thigh and a third small slash above her right shoulder. All three of which began bleeding quickly.

"Tenten! Are you alright?" Neji called out in alarm, having forgotten that his partner wasn't as adept at dodging weapons as he was since she didn't have the enhanced abilities of a Hyuuga. Tenten flinched slightly at the pain of moving her shoulder but she managed to give Neji a wave with her right hand, visibly signalling that she can still fight though not as well as before. */I must finish this quickly. If not Tenten will be placed in far greater danger/*

Unfortunately for Neji and Tenten, that short period of reprieve ended too quickly as Kidoumaru released forth another huge barrage of spikes, all heading their way. Both did their best to dodge as many as possible but even they weren't able to dodge them all. Neji suffered a spike stabbing directly onto his back, while Tenten received a few more scrapes, and slashes across her arms and legs. Huffing and puffing by the end of the assault, Tenten mentally went over her injuries. */ Damn it! I'm running low on Chakra. Not only that, I've also suffered quite a bit of injuries. Shit! There are more scrapes and slashes on my body now than when I first fought Temari in the Preliminary Chuunin Exam! /* Tenten mentally cursed her predicament.

After a few more barrages of flying spikes, followed by the giant spider falling directly on top of them, Kidoumaru had finally confirmed both the male and female ninja's weaknesses. Neji had a blind spot, or more precisely, a blind angle in which he couldn't see an enemy's projectile coming his way. And as for Tenten, she may be

good at offensive weapon throwing, but she's not very good at dodging those very same weapons. Not only that, she hasn't displayed any gift for other Ninjutsu or Genjutsu techniques either. / *Hehe... Let's finish this. I'll kill the Hyuuga first before I play longer with the girl.* / Kidoumaru thought to himself as he felt his curse seal level two taking over his body, transforming him into a monster like creature with horns and a third eye on top of his forehead. Silently, he formed his favourite weapon from his Kumo Nenkin, his bow and arrows.

Hesitating over their enemy's sudden silence, Neji had an overwhelming feeling of unease. That was why he quickly released Chakra from all the opening upon his body as well as enhancing his Byakugan eyes to the best of his ability, he needed to know exactly where their enemy was and what he was doing. There was simply no way for them to survive if this battle was to be prolonged more than it already was. Simply put, neither he nor Tenten were ever adept at stamina battles. And this was definitely turning out to become a battle of stamina and minds.

/ Accuracy 100 Destruction level: Maximum! Away you go/
Kidoumaru released his arrow without any strings attached to its end.

"NEJI!" Tenten screamed her partner's name in fright, completely shocked at the immense power of 'whatever' it was that Kidoumaru had fired at them. "Neji! Neji! God! Are you alright?" She quickly rushed over into the cloud of smoke, hoping against hope that her teammate was still alive.

Slowly, the smoke cleared, revealing the severely injured and haggard form of Neji, stumbling from one foot to the other as if he was unable to stand properly. "Oh god! Neji!" Tenten called out even while she made her way quickly towards said boy. "Oh my god!" She

whispered as she looked upon the visible hole upon her partner's chest. Glancing back at the thing responsible, she found a golden arrow protruding from the giant crater next to her friend. / *Shit! That arrow pierced right through Neji!* / She cursed.

"Tenten..." Neji shivering mouth murmured. "We have to get out of here. He'll try again soon." He cautioned even while he tried desperately to move his shaky legs.

"Right." Tenten answered back determinately. Pulling Neji's uninjured arm over her shoulder, she quickly pulled him along the forest floor, trying desperately to find cover from their enemy. Consecutively, Tenten also tried desperately to find a way out of this situation. / *There just has to be a way for us to beat him!* /

Adapting his attack slightly, this time, Kidoumaru attached a string to his arrow before he set it free flying towards its victim.

"It's coming!" Neji warned as his sixth sense suddenly flared. Tenten, taking his warning to heart, ran as fast as she could while dragging Neji with her. The both of them jumped clumsily over roots, running behind trees as best they could before they completely hid themselves behind a giant tree.

The arrow, not giving any mercy to them or the tree, simply pierced its way right through the trunk, slamming into them and stabbing right into the ground, creating a giant crater again.

From his distance, Kidoumaru couldn't really see much at all. Twisting his head slightly trying to see through the tree, Kidoumaru decided to go closer towards the area to confirm whether he had really killed them or not. Upon landing upon a tree branch that was much closer towards where his arrow had landed before hand, Kidoumaru was shocked at what he saw. Shock soon turned to anger as he raged over his presumptions through out the course of

his battle against the two Leaf Nins. / *FXXK! I thought they couldn't use any other Ninjutsu or Genjutsu skills simply because they DIDN'T perform any during the battle! DAMN! Looks like I've underestimated them AGAIN! /*

Stuck upon the side of the tree where it was pierced firmly by the string that followed the arrow, were two blocks of wood. / *FXXK! THEY USED KAWARIMI NO JUTSU! It's so FXXking easy, it's practically an INSULT to me!* Kidoumaru continued to curse to himself.

Completely focused upon condescending himself, Kidoumaru didn't pay enough attention to his surrounding as he had believed the two Leaf Nins had run away instead. However, to his surprise, Neji and Tenten had just been hiding, waiting for an opportunity to beat Kidoumaru while he was distracted. This was the perfect time.

Four Kunais suddenly shot forth from under him forcing Kidoumaru to stumble backwards as he tried his best to dodge the projectiles. Though moving backwards, Kidoumaru had all his attention focussed forward, so he couldn't possibly see Neji landing lightly upon the same branch as him from behind. "Jyuuken Hou: Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou! (Gentle Fist Style: Divinity Sixty Four strike)" With that said, Neji instantly launched into his attack.

"Two Strike!"

"Four Strike!"

"Eight Strike!"

"Sixteen Strike!"

"Thirty Two Strike!"

"Sixty Four Strike!"

Falling off the tree branch due to the force of Neji's attack, Kidoumaru passed out even before he landed harshly upon the earth beneath him.

It was a quiet victory but both Neji and Tenten savoured it none the less. With the battle finally won, Neji soon collapsed onto the branch that he had been standing on, exhaustion quickly setting in. "Neji! Are you okay?" Tenten asked, concern filling her voice. The boy could only nod tiredly in reply.

After a while he spoke up. "I'm fine. But I don't think I'll be much help to the others. You can go ahead and join the other's pursuit, you know? You don't have to stay here with me." Neji insisted, but Tenten only shook her head vehemently, seeing the boy she admired in such bad shape.

"I'm not leaving you alone. We're partners remember. And Partners never leaver each other behind. If you stay, then I stay." She stated firmly, determination evident in her voice. "And anyway, I'm pretty scratched up myself. I'm feeling worse than when I was defeated from Temari back at the Chuunin Exam. I'm also almost completely depleted of Chakra. I don't see what use I'd be for the team either." She answered truthfully, though she hated the fact that she had to admit her weakness to anyone. "So I was just thinking that maybe, we should just sit here and wait for Haku to reach us. Once we've met up with Shikamaru, Haku and Chouji, we'll see if there is anything else we can do for the team, or if we should head back."

After thinking over the proposal, Neji finally nodded his head in agreement. So that was what happened, both of them simply rested, waiting for Shikamaru, Haku and Chouji to catch up. He hated such a weakness to rely on others and to simply let others do all the work. He found that such a thing was to conform to destiny and ever since his fight with Naruto he resolved to never give in and never follow the easy path paved before him.

Unbeknownst to both Neji and Tenten, down on the ground where Kidoumaru had landed from his fall, an eerie shadow suddenly sprung forth and warped around Kidoumaru's body. It then darkened in intensity before slowly fading away again, leaving nothing behind in its wake, not even Kidoumaru's body.

(1) This was a 'Gen-Bunshin'. It's a cloning technique that is in-between Kage Bunshin and a normal Bunshin. A Kage Bunshin is a full copy that can be touched, felt, and killed; while a Bunshin is just an illusion used to distract – it cannot attempt any physical harm. The Gen Bunshin (Illusionary Bunshin) however, are able to sometimes appear like real Kage Bunshins, while at other times, appear like normal Bunshins. This is because the user usually turn themselves invisible and act under the illusion of the Gen Bunshin, resulting in opponents being confused as to whether they were fighting a real Shadow Clone or a normal illusionary clone. Sakura was the one who performed this technique.

(2) If anyone was wondering why Tenten could do the Chakra enhanced kunai technique, that's because Sakura taught her when they found out about Kidoumaru's technique ability. Tenten, being a natural weapons master, was incredibly fast at absorbing the new idea of Chakra manipulation. After all, she had known before how to use Chakra strings to return her weapon's attack, this type of Chakra manipulation was easy.

(3) 'Kumo Shibari' – Spider web bind. It's the translation used by Anbu/AnimeOne in the Anime episodes

(4) 'Kumo Soukai' – Spider web opening. Another translation used by Anbu/AnimeOne in the episodes.

(5) 'Kumo Nenkin'. This one has various names. Inane started calling it 'Golden Spikes' but eventually changed to 'Spider's cohesive bacteria.' Instead, I chose to use Anbu/AnimeOne's translation of 'Spider Web Adhesive Hypha'. DO NOT ASK ME WHAT THAT MEANS! I HAVE NO IDEA!

(6) Spider anatomical terminology, it's located at the back of the spider (basically, it's bum area) and it's function is to spin out webs.

(7) I just made Tenten copy the moves of Kakashi when he used his 'Doton: Tsuiga no Jutsu' (Earth Type: Earth Tracking Fang Technique) in book 4 of the Naruto manga or episode 17 (I think) of the Naruto anime. That's why it looks so familiar.

(8) Original Jutsu.

(9) The effect is similar to that of the Rain Ninja Technique: 'Jouro Senbon' (Raining Needles), which was performed by Rain Nins during the Chuunin Selection Exam against Gaara, manga book 7, chapter 58. It's like that but Tenten doesn't JUST use needles, she uses other weapons as well. And these are also Chakra-enhanced, Chakra-seeking weapons that can be used more than once.

(10) This move doesn't exist in the manga, it originally came from the anime series. Basically, Neji changes his original stance slightly and when he does perform this move, he literary doubles his strikes and moves twice as fast as the 'Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou' (64 Strike pattern).

Okay, just to give you all some desired answers so that you could stop hounding me via reviews.

1) Naruto is **NOT** going to suddenly appear and save everyone during this pursuit of Sasuke. In fact, he won't be playing *ANY* role in the rescue of Sasuke. So please STOP ASKING! TT

2) As for Lee. **NO** , he is **NOT** going to suddenly undergo an operation by Tsunade and **SUDDENLY** gets to go after Sakura and the others. Like, Naruto, he won't be playing any part of this little rescue mission.

3) And for those of you who haven't figured it out yet – the Black Clad figure REALLY IS ' **KAGA** '!

Coming up next chapter:

What happens when Sakura and the others finally catches up to Sakon and Taiyuya?

Pursuit IV

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After the Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter 7: Pursuit IV – intermediate chapter

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

"xxx XXX xxx" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Sorry, people! I made a mistake. In this chapter there won't be any fight between Sakura and co. against Tayuya and co. I just didn't have the time nor space to fit it in. This chapter is more of an intermediate chapter between the battle scenes. I just needed someplace in the middle to clarify certain things. Hope you don't mind.

Warning: PG-13. There are a lot of scene jumps or point of view jumps, as well as certain flashbacks in this chapter. Also from here on out, there will be MAJOR changes to the story from the cannon series. Since the original Naruto manga gives me such freedom in deciding actually WHAT happens after Naruto fails in his mission, I can do WHAT EVER I WANT! And that's exactly WHAT I'm going to be doing.

Chapter 7

"Where the hell are Sakon and the others?" Orochimaru growled angrily, even while he struggled to sit down properly on his large comfortable couch without adding any pressure or pain to his still injured arms. "Haven't they returned with Sasuke yet?" He sneered at Kabuto, frustrated at having to deal with these menial things.

Kabuto bowed lowly to his master in apology. "I'm sorry, Orochimaru-sama. It seems as if the Sound Four are late, would you like me to send Kimimaro after them?" He inquired in a quiet voice, knowing that an annoyed Orochimaru is a dangerous Orochimaru. There's simply no telling what he's master is capable of in his current state of mind.

"WHAT'S THE FXXKING POINT?" Orochimaru screamed, partly due to his raging emotions, partly due to the sudden flash of pain from his arms. Even while biting his lip to suppress a further groan of agony, Orochimaru was well aware that the deep cuts on his arms were starting to rupture again, releasing blood freely to stain the previously white bandages. He ground his teeth together in frustration, damn that Sarutobi!

Worried about his master's continually ailing health, Kabuto made a decision. "I'll start readying the best of the best that we have here, and I'll also send Kimimaro after Sasuke-sama." Turning to leave, Kabuto was halted by Orochimaru's unexpected call of "No!" Pausing mid stride, Kabuto once again turned around to meet his master's eyes.

"There's no point in forcing Sasuke-kun to come here if he's not willing to gain power this way. Even if he did agree to come, the end result may turn out to be less than what I desired." Orochimaru answered in a very cryptic way, arousing certain curiosities in Kabuto even while the young man continued to worry about his master's health. He was such a mystery to the medical ninja; he could be furious one moment and calm and calculated the next.

Knowing his disciple would wait patiently for further explanations, Orochimaru decided to comply with the silent request. "I wonder.

Which one is stronger? Someone who has the ability to copy all Jutsus in the world? ... Or someone who has the ability to see the future, and as such, theoretically, is able to gain knowledge about all Jutsus in the world. Jutsu from the past, the present, and even the future."

Kabuto could only narrow his eyes in slight confusion. "Orochimaru-sama?" He asked quietly, knowing that his master would either deem it important enough to tell him or not, the decision was his and his alone.

"Uzumaki..." That one word mumbled softly through Orochimaru's lips had Kabuto narrowing his eyes in anger and hate. If there was one name he hated more than his mother's (Dokudes), it was the Uzumaki's, right next to the Seven Council members. They were all responsible for his mother's death; they all played a part in her imminent destruction, and as such, were fully guilty in his mind. He wanted to wipe them from the face of the earth. He wanted to smear their blood on the ground and watch their corpse get mangled by wild beasts.

Grinding his teeth in suppressed anger, Orochimaru hissed the hateful name from his pale lips. "Uzumaki Ruri... Lady Oracle... I concede defeat in this first round. You truly are a very manipulative, almost power hungry, woman and a control freak." He continued to mumble lowly to himself, ignoring the tense stance of his disciple. "I can't touch your heir... because he's already the host to a damn demon, and a powerful one at that. I can't touch your sister... because she's already dead! And I can't touch you... because you've acquired (arguably) one of the world's best Shinobis as your bodyguard (1)."

While listening to his master's almost psychotic mumbling, Kabuto decided to interrupt with his own questions, although he knew it was dangerous. "Why don't we use Edo Tenshi and summon forth some of the old Uzumaki spirits? Then we would not need to fear them anymore."

"Che!" Orochimaru snorted. "For being a Dokudes, you don't know much, do you, Kabuto?" He glared angrily at Kabuto, who could only duck his head in apprehension. "No one can touch the Uzumaki spirits. Next to the Oniyoubu Clan (2), the Uzumaki's are the most dedicated in safe guarding their family secrets; bodies, bloodline or otherwise. Even summoning their deceased spirits are impossible because of a special seal that is placed on them on their very deathbeds. Each and every single Uzumaki had died or was banished with a seal placed on their foreheads, locking away their knowledge, their bloodline limit abilities as well as their souls. No, the Uzumaki family truly ARE untouchable. We have to go through an entire village just to reach them and then, it's no guarantee that we could even win against them." Orochimaru huffed in irritation. Why was everything always working against him? Why were his beautiful plans always ruined?

After a long moment of silence, Kabuto tried to appease his master with another suggestion. "Perhaps we should focus our energies into killing Naruto-kun first and foremost. After all, if the Uzumaki family loses its heir, then Lady Ruri would eventually die of old age, won't she?"

Orochimaru gave him a slow and determined shake of his head, a sneer appeared on his face for his subordinate's lack of thought. "No. There is no way Ruri wouldn't have ALREADY known of our plans and will have made her own plans to counteract ours. If we touch a single hair on that Kyuubi Brat's head, we'll have the entire Kuunoki village breathing down our necks. And at this moment in time, I do not wish to declare war on the Air. Handling Konoha and Suna at the same time is enough for me!" He concluded but then, something suddenly came to mind. "By the way, how are our negotiations with the Rain village and some of those Missing Nins from other villages?" He asked as if it were an after thought.

Standing up straight, Kabuto recounted all the information in a straight military style. "After their poor performance in the last Chuunin Exam, the Hidden Rain Village has immediately signed up

to our proposal, they are willing to send off their entire Shinobi army to back us up in our next planned attack against Konoha. After all, knowing that we were the ones who single-handedly assassinated two Kages out of the five have given us some credentials in warfare, it seems." Kabuto commented in an ironic fashion. "As for the other Missing Nins, the ex-Grass and ex-Stone Nins have agreed to join us with the condition that we share our spoils with them 40-60 (3). They're not really interested in the land, but more on the wealth and goods side of things." Pausing again to gather his thoughts, Kabuto carefully worded his next bit of information. "However, we've been having some problems recruiting those ex-Shinobis or banished Ninjas from the Hidden Air village."

Orochimaru lifted an eyebrow in question, forcing Kabuto to answer the silent query. "They're not interested in conquering Konoha, wealth, goods, fame, anything tangible like that. The only thing that sparks their interest is the destruction of the Hidden Air village itself. The only way that they would ever agree to join our cause is IF we promise we'll help them take down the Hidden Air village AFTER we've conquered Konoha. Like me, most of them were either escapees, half-breeds who were born outside of the Air village or those whom were banished by the Seven. So their hate for the Kuunoki far surpasses any other desires."

Orochimaru nodded slowly and took some moments to think things through thoroughly before coming to a decision. "So be it. Tell them that we will attack the Kuunoki once Konoha has fallen. After all, with Naruto here in Leaf, the relations between the Kuunoki and Konoha have become far closer than I would have ever liked. We would have eventually gone to war against the Kuunoki one way or the other, now that they're slowly opening their doors to the outside world. And other thing to be added to the contract, they must train us in some of the basic Kuunoki techniques, mainly the Chakra manipulation exercises. Not only that, I also want them, if there are any Dokudes's out there, to have a look at my arms, to have a look at Kimimaro's decaying body, and to work for me as scientists who are truly appreciated." A sadistic smirk stretched across Orochimaru's face. "If

all these three conditions are met... then war against the Air and the Leaf will be at hand." Orochimaru broke into a soft chuckle after his concluding speech, which slowly but surely grew louder and more erratic. Until finally, a full grown hysterical laugh broke out of his throat, ringing and echoing in the eerie walls of his empty room.

Kabuto stood patiently by the side, unwilling to interrupt his master when the man was finally in such a good mood. It has been several days since their defeat at the hands of Tsunade, Jiraiya, Naruto and Tsunade's assistant (4). And since that humiliating defeat, Orochimaru has been in a continuously bad mood. He knew his master was obsessed about the newly discovered Uzumaki heir being the same host container of the Kyuubi. It was obvious that the boy was a major threat to his master but to lay a single finger on the boy would cause international strain between the Sound and the Air, which, at this moment in time, was NOT what their current capacity could handle. And as such, they would just have to be VERY careful about how to DEAL with the Uzumaki heir. Not only that, but Sasuke STILL hadn't returned as of yet. But for the moment being, Sasuke's host body wasn't as important as the imminent Second attack being planned against Konoha. This time, this time they would win. This time, they would see to the demise of the great Leaf village. And here, even Kabuto started smiling as he dreamt of the glory days that would come.

Jumping from tree branch to tree branch, Haku suddenly pushed his right arm outwards, silently halting Shikamaru's progress behind him. Both Shinobis took some time to analyse their surroundings. Shikamaru instinctively trusting Haku's judgement, if the elder Shinobi thought they should stop and inspect their surroundings then that's exactly what they'll do. It was only a few seconds later that Haku finally released a relieved smile on his face. Looking back at Shikamaru, he whispered quietly to the other boy: "Neji and Tenten are here, waiting for us."

With that explained, both Nins quickly landed lightly towards Neji and Tenten's position, surprising the both of them as Neji hadn't had his Byakugan activated at the time. Immediately discovering Neji's severe wound and Tenten's subsequent bruises, Haku instantly ran towards the injured pair and started healing them as best he could. Shikamaru, trying not to be outdone, lifted out a small package of soldier pills, and gave one out to each of the pair.

While Haku continued on with his healing, Tenten took the time to explain to Shikamaru what had happened to separate them from the rest of the team. Shikamaru only nodded silently in approval of Neji and Sakura's decision to separate as that would have been the most logical step to take. And luckily, the decision had paid off with both Tenten and Neji still alive, though somewhat hurt.

While unable to completely heal the giant hole upon Neji's shoulder, Haku had been able to give the boy a set of different pills, consisting of a soldier pill, a blood replenishment pill, and a pain suppression pill (5). Other than that, Haku also managed to dress Neji's wound up professionally so that it wouldn't catch any infections, which enabled the Hyuuga boy to move with relatively little pain.

"Alright, I've done all I can for the two of you but Neji, you really have to go to a hospital and have the other Medic Nins look at that wound for you. I can't do anything here with the limited stuff I've brought. But however you do it, DON'T move your shoulder too much or else it'll start bleeding again and then it'll get infected easily. I really wish I could help carry you back to Konoha but I've got to go after the others and make sure their okay as well." Haku explained thoroughly, though feeling very guilty that he couldn't help Neji further.

Tenten had suggested that she help carry Neji, but with his weight and her still exhausted form (even with the Soldier pill), it was highly arguable whether that was a good idea in itself or not.

However, all their contemplations were brought to an abrupt halt when Kaga suddenly emerged from a shadowed tree branch right

next to the group. He simply rose up from the shadowed ground underneath him. Haku, Tenten and Neji were just about to attack the unexpected visitor when Shikamaru (being the only person who recognises the man) halted their movements, signalling that the man was an ally.

"Why are you here, Kaga-san?" Shikamaru asked calmly, though deep in his heart, he was just as suspicious of his sensei's activities as an enemy's move and he was careful not to say sensei as to not alert the others to his connection with the shadow master.

Kaga gave his unofficial pupil an indifferent stare for some time, mentally measuring what was going through the boy's mind, before finally coming out clean and stating his business with them. "By order of the Lady Oracle, I am here to guide Neji-san and Tenten-san back to Konoha so that they may get treatment from the new Hokage. I am also to inform the two of you that one of you should head east of here to reach Sakura while the other follow Kiba's trail on the west of this terrain. Who follows who will be up to you."

/ New Hokage! / This thought flashed through Neji, Tenten and Haku's mind, rendering them rather surprised at the new turn of events. Shikamaru, alone, remained stoic, as he had already known of Naruto's mission but didn't think it appropriate to tell the others.

With that said and done, Kaga unceremoniously activated his special Shadow techniques - Kage Michi (Way of the Shadows). Summoning forth a Kage Kekai (Shadow Barrier) to surround Neji and Tenten, he quickly transported them away from their current locations without even waiting for their responses. After that, he gave Shikamaru a short nod before he too, disappeared without a trace.

After a long period of silence, filled mostly with shock and astonishment, Haku finally broke through the quietness with a question. "That... was Kaga? THE Legendary Shadow Master? Bodyguard to Naruto's Aunt, the Lady Oracle of the Hidden Air village!" He squeaked.

Shikamaru sighed at his teacher's strange and mysterious antics. "Yeah. That's him alright... Geese, he's so troublesome some times." Dropping his shoulders in a release of tension, Shikamaru stretched his arms out in preparation. "Okay, I'm gonna go after Sakura. You'll go after Kiba. For some odd reason, I think Kiba will most probably be more injured than Sakura." With that said, he left on his pursuit of the pink haired konoichi, heading towards the east. Haku on the other hand, quickly shook off his shock at the strange meeting he had had with the mysterious Shadow Master, before he too, headed off towards the west, silently praying that Kiba hadn't gotten himself into too much trouble.

A hand slammed hard onto the sturdy wood of the Hokage's table, its vibrations resulting in the table literally shaking due to the force of the impact. "WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN! YOU SENT THOSE **GENINS** AFTER OROCHIMARU'S HENCHMEN **WITHOUT ANY BACKUP** ?" Tsunade screeched at the top of her voice. Windows, glass, mirrors, all these materials shook at the intensity of Tsunade's angry voice, some even broke or shattered due to the high pitch sound.

"Please accept my humblest apologies, Godaime Hokage-sama. But as I've said to Haruno-san, we just don't have the resources right now to handle her request. Half of the Shinobi population is already outside of Konoha either acting as spies or on missions; the other half is busy trying to reconstruct the village buildings as well as strengthening our defences. We just don't have enough manpower to pursue the Uchiha boy as well. It was my decision to sacrifice the Uchiha, if it came to that, instead of risking Konoha's safety any further." Hyuuga Hiashi bowed low to Tsunade but his voice was firm in his belief that he had done the right thing. Tsunade couldn't be completely mad at him for he had in fact did the correct thing. What if orochimaru had decided to attack?

A tense silence ensued after Hyuuga Hiashi's firm declaration. After a while, Naruto finally broke the thick tension hanging in the air, by

turning his body around to face the door as he slowly walked towards it. "I'll go after them." He declared stiffly, even while he mentally berated himself for leaving his teammates in such a predicament.

However, before he was able to even touch the door nob and turn it, a sudden upsurge of darkness in the room was the only warning they had before Kaga-san, the last of the Shadow Masters abruptly emerged standing in the middle of the room. He held both Chouji and Neji's unconscious bodies in each of his arms, while Tenten was draped over one of his shoulders. "That won't be necessary, Naruto-sama." Kaga simply stated.

"Kaga-san! Chouji! Neji! Tenten-san!" Naruto called out in alarm even while both himself and Shizune rushed at the unconscious Genins, lifting them carefully off Kaga's body and placing them comfortably on a few of the Hokage's couches and chairs. Tsunade and Shizune both started checking over each of the young Shinobis, making sure that there weren't any life-threatening injuries on them.

"Shit!" Tsunade swore. "This boy took one of the Akimichi special pills but I don't know whether he took all of them or just the first ones. Damn! We need to get him to the hospital NOW!" She started barking orders at anyone who was standing around to move the injured boys, but another upsurge of darkness and shadows later, Tsunade suddenly found herself (as well as all the other people present in the once Hokage's office – Naruto, Shizune, Jiraiya, Kaga, the unconscious Chouji, Neji and Tenten) standing right outside the emergency room of Konoha's local hospital.

"SHIT! Can you WARN me before you do that again next time, KAGA!" Slightly nauseated at the abrupt transportation technique, Tsunade didn't waste time berating the younger man, instead, she started barking orders to all the nurses and doctors present, and things quickly moved into motion.

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune called out as she finally unwrapped the bandages on Neji's shoulders. "There's a large punctured wound on

this boy's left shoulder! We need to get the nerve and arteries healed effective immediately or else he may lose the use of his arms!" She warned gravely, biting her lip at such a predicament.

Soon, a swarm of Medic Nins, doctors and nurses had separated into two groups, one helping Shizune fix the large open punctured wound on Neji's shoulder, the other desperately researching any antidotes to counteract the effects of the Akimichi special Chakra pills. While this was all happening, Naruto had already concluded that Tenten wasn't suffering from any major injuries, just Chakra exhaustion and had moved her into a private room, awaiting any visitors.

It was then, when all the fuss over the two boys had settled down slightly, that Jiraiya and Naruto turned their attentions to Kaga for some answers. Since Tsunade was obviously busy at the moment, Jiraiya took it upon himself to question the Shadow Master's motives. "So... where did you find the kids, and where are the others? What did you mean by 'it won't be necessary' for Naruto to go after them?"

"Akimichi-san, Tenten-san and Hyuuga-san were all able to defeat their enemies, Jiroubou of the South Gate and Kidoumaru of the East Gate. They were both members of Orochimaru's elite Sound Four Guards. Quite an accomplishment for mere Genins, don't you think? However, due to severe Chakra exhaustion and the heavy injuries, they decided to stay put instead of continuing on in the pursuit of Uchiha Sasuke-san. The 'others', as you may have guessed already, are still on the pursuit of said fugitive." Kaga explained calmly, never noting any interesting aspects within in his conversation.

"But that still doesn't answer the third question? Why am I not allowed to go after Sasuke?" Naruto demanded to know, since he had already picked out what Kaga had meant the first time he told Naruto that his interference wasn't 'necessary.' It basically meant that he just wasn't allowed to go, and Kaga's presence simply justifies the

fact that the man is here just to make SURE he doesn't go after his friends in the first place.

"I meant what I said, Naruto-sama. Your interference isn't necessary. We already have a few Ninjas who had been sent after your friends and they will make sure that the Uchiha survivor will be brought back. Do not worry." Kaga stated again in his calm and uninterested voice.

"WHY AM I NOT ALLOWED TO GO?" Naruto shouted in demand, frustrated that his senior refuses to answer his question truthfully.

Kaga gaze straight at Naruto's unwavering eyes for long time after that, but finally he spoke his answer. "I cannot tell you, Naruto-sama... for you already know." With that cryptic remark, Kaga suddenly disappeared into shadow himself, leaving two dumfounded people behind, namely Jiraiya and a still furious Naruto. That damned Shadow Master! Why can't he just tell me! Auntie has seen something! I know it!

xxx XXX xxx **(Slight HinataXNaruto bit coming up)**

After Kaga's abrupt disappearance without completely answering Naruto's question, the blond haired boy stormed out of the hospital in a fit of rage. He knew, deep in his heart, that he wouldn't disobey his Aunt's orders, but it didn't mean he would be satisfied by all the mystery and secrets that shrouded the decision. / *I already know... What the hell does THAT mean!* / Naruto mentally cursed.

Upon exiting the hospital's large front doors, Naruto was met half way by the timid presence of Hinata, who surprised him slightly by her sudden appearance and unforeseen words.

"Na... Naruto... kun." Hinata stuttered in surprise as well.

Naruto's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and he automatically asked: "Hinata-san? What are you doing here?" He looked behind him at the hospital's front gate. He knew he should be a little bit nicer

but he was still angry with Kaga. */ Was she supposed to go to the hospital? I don't see why though, considering she's not hurt or anything. /*

Hinata instantly looked down, as if the ground had suddenly caught her attention with something interesting. Her usually small blush had turned to a full-grown tomato colour while she stood uneasily under Naruto's careful gaze. "I... I um..." The nervous girl continued to stammer in haplessness. Swallowing a large gulp of apprehension, Hinata finally found the courage to say something without having to pause several times in the same sentence. "I just wanted to see you. To see if you're okay and not injured or something..." If possible, the reddish tone of her facial features deepened even more.

Naruto looked quizzically at the slightly hunched figure of the Hyuuga heiress. */ She's worried about me! Me! Why? How did she even know that I was here? Is she stalking me? /* "Um... I'm fine. Hinata-san." An awkward pause stretched for a few silent minutes between the two.

Shaking away the strange awkwardness, Naruto finally turned his mind back to whatever it had been occupied with before – his friend's pursuit of Sasuke. And with that thought in mind, Naruto decided to ask around for more information about his anti-social teammate who turned traitor, practically over night. "Hinata-san. Do you know anything about Sasuke? Do you know why he would be targeted by Orochimaru, or even why he's so obsessed with power and getting stronger?"

Even though he had never voiced his concerns about Sasuke with either the Hokage, Kakashi or Sakura, but it was obvious to him that the dark haired boy was totally preoccupied with the ambition to become stronger and kill 'some guy.' It wasn't healthy, but it wasn't Naruto's business to interfere and he had left it alone like any guy would. Now, with the consequences of his decision at hand, Naruto started wondering that perhaps he should have confronted the developing problem before and not let it run its course.

Startled by Naruto's sudden inquiry, Hinata took some time to compose herself before she consciously thought through all that she knew about the secretive last member of the Uchiha clan, although she dearly wanted to just talk to the blonde. "Um..." Glancing this way and that, Hinata then suggested in a quiet voice. "Perhaps this isn't the best place to talk about this right now..." It wasn't that Hinata felt uncomfortable detailing the past tragedies of her fellow classmate; it's just that she didn't think that in the middle of the street, right outside the hospital was a very good place to talk about this issue, especially when there were so many people around and then rumours would spread that they were seeing each other and... She got rid of that thought, it would never happen. Not to mention, she was embarrassed enough about her own behaviour around Naruto's presence, she really didn't want anyone else to see her this way.

Naruto nodded to her silent acquiescence and started walking away, towards the Hokage monuments. He was sure that the two of them will find some much needed privacy there to talk about what ever they needed, without any interruptions. Their walk consisted of complete silence, but they were both busy sorting out their own thoughts and feelings.

For Naruto, he was still confused about the girl's odd behaviours as well as her strange concern for his safety. It just didn't make sense. He wasn't very close to her at all. In fact, the only time he had really interacted with her was during the Chuunin Exam, when they went through the first written test as well as the preliminary battles. He hadn't even considered her a 'friend' yet, just another acquaintance at best. But it seems that the Hyuuga heiress has already decided to befriend him, for whatever reason he couldn't fathom. However, the real question was this, was he willing to become her 'friend'. Pondering this in his mind, Naruto paid little to no attention to Hinata's fluctuating expressions.

At first, Hinata had been devastated that Naruto had simply turned around and started walking away. She believed that she had blown

her one chance at getting closer to the mysterious boy. She thought that he had rejected her offer and was going to walk away from her. It wasn't until Naruto stopped walking in mid-step and looked back at her, that she realised he was waiting for her to follow him.

With a new beat in step, Hinata quickly caught up with the blonde haired boy, not wanting to delay him any more than necessary. Ever since then, Hinata had spent their entire trip trying to analyse what exactly were her feelings for him.

/ Oh why do I feel this way whenever I'm near Naruto-kun! / Hinata asked herself, feeling her heart beat faster and faster whenever she neared him. / It's not like we're really close to each other or anything. I mean, we've only just met a few times and hardly even talk to each other... But ever since the Chuunin Exam, I've been trying harder to become stronger... I think I'm stronger anyway... stronger than I use to be... But what does that have to do with Naruto-kun? I don't know. Bu-but I want him to notice me, I want him to see me. /

xxx XXX xxx **(This extract was taken from chapter 13 of Faith in Humanity ; the last paragraph is new though)**

(FLASHBACK)

One gentle palm to the chest followed by a direct point to the girl's right arm, and Hinata started spewing up blood from her mouth. All the audience watched in silent horror as the fragile looking girl tried again to attack the seemingly invincible Neji, but was grabbed firmly instead as he slowly but surely pulled her jacket's sleeve up, revealing to the world all the bruised points upon Hinata's arm. One more flick of his palm and Hinata's battered body was flung backwards, slamming onto the hard ground.

Humiliated, hurt and probably scared, Hinata slowly struggled onto her feet until she was standing unsteadily. She looked up and locked eyes with Naruto's firm ones. He gave her a determined look and nodded. She, in turn, smiled in reply, happy to at least have his support even though she was bleeding and bruised.

Again and again, no matter how harsh the assault, no matter how much it hurt, Hinata stood up, always standing up, if only to meet Naruto's approving eyes once more. I won't run! I won't run! I have someone here who accepts me, no matter how badly I perform. I want to look my best in front of him. I won't shy away. I won't hide. I don't want to hide from him, not from someone I respect. Arigato Naruto-kun. It seems I've at least found some of the courage I've always wanted...However, her thoughts were cut short when Neji slammed his palm right into her stomach, knocking the wind out of her while she collapsed onto the floor coughing up more blood.

Unknown to Neji, Hinata wasn't listening to his vicious words at all, she was looking into his cold eyes - eyes that held so much pain hidden behind a façade of indifference and anger, anger at the main family and the world as a whole. Suddenly, she realised that she wasn't the only one in pain, how she had never noticed how much her cousin suffered, she didn't know. But now that she could see it, she won't ignore it, and she won't runaway from it either, not like what Neji was doing. /I've already found a way out of the darkness, I won't let him stay there either./ "It's not me at all, Neji-niisan... The person who is lost and suffering within the destiny of the main and branch houses... is you..." She whispered.

Hinata watched impassively as Neji charged at her, obviously enraged by her comment, but she wasn't scared, she wasn't afraid. /I'm not running away anymore. I'll face whatever challenges you throw my way, and I'll do my best to overcome them./ Almost as if she welcomed her cousin's attack, Hinata was very surprised by the Jounin instructors' sudden appearance and apprehension of her cousin's movements. However, the relief she had felt at that instant was short lived, as she suddenly found her knees buckling under her own weight. Slumping onto the floor in an undignified manner, all Hinata could think to herself at the moment was /God! I hurt! Everywhere I feel is pain... Please... Please don't let him see my like this.../ She thought to herself as she finally passed out into unconsciousness. During her moments of darkness enwrapped by warmth, she heard a voice. "I'm proud of you."

(END FLASHBACK)

Thinking back to how Naruto had inspired her to go beyond her perceived limits, Hinata felt her body flush again, but this time, with pride as well as embarrassment. */ To me, he is the embodiment of strength. And I... I need that from him. I need that seemingly endless strength, that bottomless pit of courage and determination. /* Coming to this small conclusion, Hinata's shoulders suddenly slumped in disappointment. */ Is that all I want though? Just his strength, is that all I care about? I sound more like a leech, living off on his energy, courage and power! A parasite, practically! /* Frowning in intense mental scrutiny, Hinata finally decided that it wasn't JUST Naruto's strength and courage that interests her, she wanted more from him.

*/ He attracts me with just his mere presence... his presence helps me keep calm... he makes me feel safe and warm... almost like I belong there, right next to him. He gives me comfort, even when he doesn't know he's doing it. Just looking at him makes me feel so weak and vulnerable, and at the same time, empowered. Like... as long as I have him looking at me, watching me, I can't go wrong. That... as long as I have his support, I can do anything. As long as I have him with me, then I'm complete... WAIT A MINUTE! DID I JUST SAY 'As long as I **HAVE HIM WITH ME!**' /* Tensing at the sudden rush of complex emotions and confusion, Hinata tried desperately to make sense of her wayward desires. */ Okay, back track. 'As long as I have him with me, then I'm complete.' What the hell does that mean... /* The panicked girl started twirling her fingers and fidgeting as she continued to walk along side her silent idol, her mind racing in furious thought.

Taking a sneak peak at Naruto from the side of her eyes, Hinata tried to see if her attractions towards the blonde haired boy were just an emotional parasitic affair or was there any physical attraction as well. */ Okay, I'll admit, he's cute. With his wild spiky blonde hair and those amazing blue eyes; his well tone body... wait a minute, I've never seen him with his clothes off! So how the hell do I know that he has a*

well tone body! His clothes off? What am I thinking? I can probably see him if I use... NO! NO! I'm not a pervert like that! / Shaking off that unsettling thought, Hinata confirmed to herself that YES, she does feel some kind of physical attraction to the boy, but more importantly were her confusing emotional attachments. / What kind of internal attributes about him do I like? ... He's the complete opposite of me. While I'm timid, he's full of courage and determination. While I often hesitate, he just goes ahead and does things without a second thought. While I'm weak, he's strong. He complements me; he is everything I'm not, though I want to be... So what the hell does that all mean? /

It took Hinata a few more minutes to figure out the depth of her feelings and to finally put a name to what she had been harbouring for the silent youth beside her. */I like him? ... yes... I guess... but 'like' doesn't seem strong enough... I'm attracted to him, physically, mentally, and emotionally. He is everything I'm not. When he's not near me, I think about him almost constantly. And when he is near me, I always feel my face flush in shyness and my heart start racing. I'm always trying to impress him while at the same time, too shy to do much else. But just at the thought of him, I feel warm. I guess... I guess I'm really... starting to fall in love with him... But maybe, 'Love' is still too strong a word, while 'Like' is too weak of a word I'm looking for. But I'm sure that what I'm feeling currently is between those two. This is no longer a minor crush! I want to know more about him. I want to see his family. I want to be close to him. /* Hinata confirmed, because she knew all about those fake callings of love which were nothing more than a crush.

Too often in the past, Hinata had found herself developing those short, almost frivolous crushes on some of her previous academy classmates. There was a time she had harboured a dream of being with the infamous Sasuke, as had most of the female population in her class but that little (not even a real) crush had lasted all of a few hours. Next was Shikamaru, Hinata had once thought that the boy's laziness was due to his courage to go against the rest of the world and demonstrated his rebellion by not trying as hard as he should.

But in the end, she realised that he was what he seemed to be – just lazy. There was even a time when Hinata thought of being with Kiba. However, after being paired with the boy for a while now as teammates, Hinata had drifted away from that notion a long time ago. Now, she finds herself thinking about a relationship with another male ninja, but this time seems different somehow. Before, it was always her active imagination that first brought on the fantasies. But this time, her feelings had leapt forth before she even knew what was happening. Everything had seemed so sudden when in fact, her own emotions had been slowly developing with time, while she (herself) just hadn't noticed which route it was taking. She had developed a deep feeling for him, not just something only skin deep.

/ So this isn't a typical crush. / Hinata thought to herself. / It might even end up as real 'love'. Perhaps, I should just wait and see how this develops. I mean, I don't want to push Naruto-kun into anything, especially when I'm still not 100 percent sure myself... but I'll just let fate takes us where she will. If we're meant to be, then I'm sure that time will tell. Plus the boy doesn't even know anything about me. He would run in horror if I said anything of the sort. / Having come to a decision at last, Hinata finally looked up and in surprise, she found herself and Naruto having already reached their destination. The two of them had already reached the bottom of the Hokage tower and were just gazing at the giant heads above them.

xxx XXX xxx **(Non-romance bit starting again)**

Pulling all his wandering thoughts back in focus, Naruto repeated his original question. "Hinata-san, can we talk about Sasuke now? If you know anything about Sasuke's past, please tell me. Do you know why he would be targeting by Orochimaru, or even why he's so obsessed with power and getting stronger?"

Hinata took a deep breath, forcibly stabilise her raging heartbeat and stuttering voice, before she finally started the story. "There was a time, a long time ago, that Sasuke-kun... isn't like the way he is now. He had a family: a father, a mother, and an older brother. Like the Hyuuga family, the Uchiha extended family was large, one of the

largest in Konoha, and they were also considered one of the elite families. However, Sasuke's immediate family was the head of the Uchiha clan and as such, there are high expectations placed on the children's shoulders to out perform everyone else." / *Just like me... but I failed in that, and as such, I'm considered a disgrace.* / Hinata thought silently to herself but didn't voice her idea. She didn't know why she didn't stumble when speaking to him, maybe it was just because she was telling him history.

"The Uchiha clan was a prestigious clan. Most of them worked for the Konoha's Police force, and were thought of as the guards who keep law and order in the Leaf. However, there was one exception. Uchiha Itachi. The older brother of Sasuke and Clan heir to the Uchiha clan, was recognised as a genius Ninja from an early age. At 7, Itachi graduated as the top student of the Academy during his year. At 10, he became a Chuunin. Later, he was enlisted into the Anbu, I think at the age of 14 or 15. So... as you can see, there was probably more pressure placed on Sasuke-kun to either out-perform his older brother, or to be just as good as him. I think... I think that type of family pressure is part of the problem..." Hinata's mumbling softened slightly as she remembered how her father had scolded her when she was unable to even learn the basic steps of the Hyuuga stance. Her father had often threw insults and comments about comparing the great Uchiha heir to her, his superior accomplishments to her own non-existent ones, that was the only reason why she had known of all those facts without having scrolled through the Ninja administrations own records.

"Around 5 years ago, something happened in the Uchiha clan. Something horrible that decimated the great numbers of the once prestigious clan, and left Sasuke-kun mentally scarred for life. It was the night Uchiha Itachi murdered his entire clan in one fell swoop. No one really knows how he did it, or whether he had any accomplices, but the truth of the matter is that there was an eyewitness account that confirmed that Uchiha Itachi was the killer of at least his own family. That witness was Sasuke-kun. I don't really know the details but it seemed that on that night, Itachi killed everyone in his clan, all

except his younger brother, Sasuke-kun. And because of that event, Sasuke-kun changed. He became withdrawn, anti-social, he no longer cares when others praised him in the class and he doesn't care that others try to give him sympathy. When my father asked to take him in as an adoptive son, he refused, deciding to stay in a lonely apartment by himself instead. I guess that's probably why he's so determined to become strong." Hinata concluded her story on a sad note. Even though she didn't really interact with the dark haired boy much, but he had been one of her classmates, and she had been watching him as well as others.

"So revenge is his goal." Naruto muttered as he closed his eyes. His heart clenched tightly as Naruto remembered a time when he too, had 'revenge' as the only thought in his mind, and he remembered how far he would go just to 'exact said revenge.' It was not a path to be treaded so lightly.

(FLASHBACK) (Extract from Chapter 10 of Faith of Humanity , slightly changed)

The nine-year-old boy stared down at his own blood stained hands, standing in a room splattered with so much blood that it was impossible to tell what the wall's original colours were. He was in so much shock at that time, and then fell into a second depression.

(END OF FLASHBACK)

/ Yeah... I became only a shell with no soul... / Naruto clenched his fist in tension and slowly relaxed it. */ I need to see... I need to know what he went through so that I can actually help him... but how... /* Suddenly, an idea flitted into his mind, an insane idea indeed, but an idea none the less. And as Naruto isn't the type of person to ponder the consequences of his actions, he decided to just do it and see what effects it'll entail later. "Hinata-san. Can you please lead me to the old Uchiha residence?"

Although frowning slightly in confusion at Naruto's strange request, Hinata did eventually decided to comply, And so, the two young Shinobis turned away from the Hokage tower, walking towards the west side of the village, where the abandoned Uchiha residence still reside.

After a few minutes of walking, they finally reach their destination. Naruto paused and looked around at the deserted streets. It was so surreal to see such a well decorated place completed empty of all inhabitants, of all life. Even the birds or other animals don't come anywhere near this vicinity. The cold and silent atmosphere hung in the air like a hissing snake, waiting patiently for its prey to come closer before it bites. Naruto shivered at the sense of 'death' that permeated all over the place. / *I guess this is it.* / He swallowed his courage and lifted his hands into a seal, ready to activate his bloodline limit ability.

"Na... Naruto-kun?" Hinata mentally cursed her luck, her stupid stammering had returned. But then again, the entire atmosphere of the place was getting to her too. Even though she had known where the Uchiha residence was located, she had never really come here before, and it's starting to freak her out. "What are you doing?" She asked in a very timid voice, hoping against hope that he had gotten what he came here to get and was ready to leave the place once and for all.

"I need to see what happened here all those years ago." Naruto stated as calmly as he possibly could, even while his heart raced at the thought of performing this in front of his 'friend'? Could she be considered a 'friend'?

"How... How do you do that?" Trying desperately to distract herself from the eeriness of the place and the sponge off as much courage from Naruto as she could, Hinata tried to keep the conversation going, she had wanted to know more about the mysterious boy after all .

"I have a bloodline limit ability as well. And it's the ability to predict the future, and see into the past. With this ability, I should be able to see into the past when the tragedy happened. Hinata-san, please be quiet, I need to concentrate." And with all said and done, Naruto activated his technique but he wondered why he performed his sacred technique in the presence of a total stranger, he would be completely defenceless against her in this state. / YOCHIGAN! (*Prediction's Eye*) /

Flashes of images and sound whirled passed Naruto's mind in an instant. He was becoming more proficient at controlling the Yochigan. Unlike before, where he had to guess the time period of which he wishes to search out by using the 'bubble dimension' (6) or the 'mirror dimension' (7), now, he could pinpoint the exact time line of which he wants to focus on without having to go through all those troubling effects.

Naruto watched the special bond and interaction between young Sasuke and his idol of a brother – Itachi. He watched as Sasuke became more and more depressed when other people unconsciously compared him to his brother. He continued to watch silently as Sasuke cried and screamed when the boy was put under the effects of Itachi's newly developed Mangekyou Sharingan technique. Naruto could feel how devastated the boy looked and he could feel the intense betrayal that was literary filtering out of the boy's shaking body. He stood there, silent, as Itachi gave Sasuke his final advice – "You can awaken the same Mangekyou Sharingan as me. However, there is a requirement. You must kill your closest friend." That was all Naruto could handle before he became sick. He deactivated the Yochigan immediately after hearing that sick comment.

By deactivating the Yochigan however, Naruto also left himself completely vulnerable to the onslaught of pain (in his eyes) that followed as a side effect of that technique. A gasp of pain was all Naruto allowed himself to utter as he literary collapsed onto the floor, keeping his eyes shut tightly, while also covering it from the effects of

the sun's rays. The burning sensation continued to build behind Naruto's eyes, and he couldn't help but whimper in pain as blood began to seep from his eyes. His body shook unconsciously as the shock slowly overcame him. And, he could hear Hinata's voice calling his name from far away, in a very concerned tone. But these things didn't bother Naruto as much anymore, seeing as he had abruptly fallen unconscious due to the intensity of the pain.

Hinata continued to hover over Naruto's sleeping body anxiously. She hadn't thought that the boy would just simply collapse after performing his strange Jutsu. After all, she had never known of anyone in the Hyuuga family to pass out after having used the Byakugan for such a short amount of time, but then again, different bloodline limits may have different effects. She hadn't been completely sure whether he had been telling the truth or not when he said he had the ability to see into the future and the past. But watching as his eyes shone those interesting golden rings upon it, she was ready to believe anything and everything.

That, coupled with the fact that Naruto's eyes started bleeding, literary freaked her out. Having clumsily wrapped his closed eyes in bandages, Hinata managed to move (or drag) the unconscious boy away from the deserted Uchiha clan district and into one of the nearby parks. There, she rested Naruto against an old, wilting tree, as she sat by twiddling her fingers together in nervousness. He was just laying there, his lips moving slightly with each passing breath tempting her. What did his lips taste like? Were they soft? NO! NO! she couldn't think about that now.

It wasn't just the boy's sudden collapse that had scared her, nor was it the combination of the bleeding eyes; part of why she was feeling so alarmed at the moment was also due to her own emotions. When she had first watch Naruto as he crumpled onto the ground, her heart had practically leapt out of her chest. It had stopped beating for a few seconds, she was sure. And after those few skipped heartbeats, her heart then started racing again at an uncontrollable

rate. It was like she really had no control over her own emotions when it came to this particular blonde boy.

Hinata was abruptly brought out of her musings however when she heard a soft groan escaping from Naruto's lips. Instantly by his side and (unconsciously) smoothing away the invisible wrinkles on his forehead, she tried to calm him down using her most reassuring voice. "There, there, Naruto-kun. Everything's all right now. You are safe. You... are you okay? Are your eyes... hurting? They were bleeding for no reason and..." For a second, Hinata had feared that she would never be able to see those magnificent eyes again, those beautiful sky-blue eyes that almost sparkled under direct sunlight. She felt a pain of loss she had not felt before. What if he could not look at her again?

As fast as her panic had arisen, it had disappeared just as rapidly, when Naruto mumbled back to her that he was just fine. "I'm fine. Hinata-san... And... arigato... for looking after me while I was incapacitated I mean." He thanked her in a soft, gentle voice, filled with lingering gratitude. Naruto then slowly sat up into a more comfortable position while his hands roamed over the decent bandage wrapped firmly around his still bleeding eyes.

"But-But your eyes!" Hinata murmured, worried about the boy's bleeding appendage.

"They'll heal with time, probably in a couple of minutes more. It's a side effect of my bloodline-limit ability so this happens all the time. I'm use to it already." Naruto reassured via his explanation but Hinata still looked at him worriedly.

A long silence ensued after that comment, both of them unable to find a new topic to talk about and both too embarrassed to rehash the previous topic of discussion. Even though Hinata was very curious about what had happened to Naruto, she was still too shy to inquire about anything; and Naruto was rather busy thinking over what he had seen through the Yochigan instead of paying her any attention. The silence lasted a long time.

Suddenly, the awkward silence was disrupted by Hinata's stomach growling in hunger. The pale haired girl instantly turned several shades of red before it finally settled on a very brilliant red that's even redder than most tomatoes. */ GOD! How embarrassing! How could that happen? And in front of him? /* She mentally berated herself even while she stuttered out an apology. "Go... gomen (sorry) Naruto-kun. I... I haven't had lunch yet... so... so... so I... uhhh..." Busy twiddling her fingers together and completely focused on the greenness of the grass below her, Hinata hadn't noticed Naruto's slight change of expression, from serious to having a small but crooked smile on his face.

/ Arigato Hinata-san. For bringing me back to reality. / Naruto thought to himself. Coughing to draw the girl's attention away from her embarrassment, Naruto suggested they have lunch together. "Well, I'm pretty hungry myself. I hadn't had lunch yet since I took Tsunade-sama and Shizune-nee-chan back to Konoha. So why don't we have lunch together?" He asked nicely, not sure what her response would be.

Hinata had frozen. Her body shocked into immobilisation, even while her heart raced forward, eager to spend some more quality time with the mysterious boy. */ Did he just ask me out on a date! NO! BAD HINATA! BAD! Naruto-kun couldn't possibly mean anything like that! It is just lunch between friends... um... at least I THINK we're friends anyway... it's just lunch! /* Snapping out of her sudden gloomy state, Hinata finally replied with an affirmative.

Clumsily standing up on his slightly weak knees, Naruto felt his face flush in humiliation, as he needed Hinata to help steady himself by having one of his arms over her shoulder. Mentally pushing the mortification away from his thoughts, Naruto took a deep breath before asking the girl behind him for an even bigger favour. "Um... Hinata-san. Could you please guide me to Ichiraku Ramen Stand. Since I can't exactly see... I don't really know where I'm going... or where we're currently at, at the moment, either."

Dropping his head in shame and with the bandage covering his eyes, Naruto couldn't possibly see the sweet, little smile that was being openly displayed on Hinata's face as she thought about her idol actually requesting HER (of all people) for help. "HAI!" She answered back enthusiastically, and together, the both of them wobbled along towards their destination.

/ I will deal with Sasuke when he gets back. That I promise. There's no point in me going after him now. Since Kaga-san told me not to worry about it, it probably means that Aunt Ruri has got something planned. So this time, I won't interfere, but I will demand an answer from them later. / Naruto thought to himself resolutely.

"Itachi. Kisame. You have failed." A dark, shadowed figure's ominous voice echoed in the empty chamber.

"We apologise for our failure. We have no other excuse except that we had underestimated our opponent's powers." Itachi replied calmly, showing absolutely no emotion in his voice.

"Itachi. Why did you not inform us before that the Kyuubi host had made contact with the Kuunokigakure?" the shadowed being asked again.

"That is because I did not know that Naruto-kun had made contact with the Air village." Itachi answered resolutely.

"He left Konoha at the age of six. You were still there at the time. How could you NOT have known about his leave?" The menacing voice demanded in a harsh and cruel tone.

"At the time, all I knew was that Naruto-kun had left on a journey with one of the Legendary Sennin, Jiraiya-sama. I had not known that they were on a journey towards the Kuunoki." Itachi answered respectfully even while not altering his original, monotone voice.

A long silence ensued after Itachi's announcement, resulting in Kisame feeling slightly uncomfortable so he shifted his Samehada from one side of his shoulder to the other, waiting tensely for the judgement to come. Finally, the silence was broken.

"Itachi, Kisame. I will give you both the benefit of the doubt and provide you with a second chance. Find Sasori and Daidara (8); bring them here. The four of you will retrieve the Kyuubi no Kitsune host once again. This is our top priority. We cannot let the Kyuubi fall into the influence of the Kuunoki, no matter what the cost. If anything or anyone stand in your way, destroy them, even if it means you must wipe out the entire Konoha village, do so." Those were the final words out of the darkened figure. Instantly, all three figures disappeared from the chamber, leaving it empty once again.

(End)

(1) He's referring to Kaga-san.

(2) Another well-known clan in the Hidden Air village. Translation of 'Oniyoubu' is 'Ghost Summoners'.

(3) Percentage of spoils gained from conquering your opposition. 40 percent of assets go to Missing Nins from Grass and Stone, while the other 60 percent belongs to Sound.

(4) Kabuto didn't really know Shizune's name at the time.

(5) Basically, a drug that suppresses pain - what's commonly known as a pain pill.

(6) The 'bubble' filled dimensional space that was used to track down Tsunade in Chapter 2 of Restoration of Faith .

(7) The strange 'mirror' used for predictions and past revelations in Chapter 10 of Faith in Humanity .

(8) Spoiler warning for those who haven't read the newest chapters of the Naruto manga! I'm really sorry for spoiling it for you, but I needed a few more (original) Akatsuki members to come along.

Just a few more pointers/spoilers to appease you people who are really interested and keeps on asking me questions on the reviews.

1) **KIMIMARU WILL NOT BE FIGHTING** any of the members of the Sasuke rescue team! He won't even be there, he simply won't be coming AT ALL!

2) No, I'm not going to tell you exactly WHY Kaga is collecting the sound four, but he IS collecting them (other than Kimimaro that is) and The Sound Four will be appearing later on in the series again – this gives you a clue that they're not dead.

3) There is a good reason WHY Naruto isn't allowed to pursue Sasuke and it will be revealed later on in the series. I'm not gonna give you too much of a spoiler on this particular point.

I hope you all don't mind the INCREDIBLY long and arduous bit in the middle showcasing both Naruto and Hinata's insecurities and confusion about their feelings. I just wanted to make it BLATANTLY OBVIOUS that (in my opinion) 'love' should develop over time. I don't believe in love at first sight, and I don't believe it will ever last unless it is 'developed over time.' I don't want my characters to 'fall in love' and then 'fall OUT of love' later on. This WILL be a GRADUAL process. It will be slow and tedious, up till the point when they both realises that they ALREADY are in love with each other. And when that time comes, the bond between them will be so strong that it simply can't be broken. I'm a sap I know... T.T Just hope you all bare with me with the long wait.

Some of you are probably wondering why I put some 'author's interruptions' in between the bits of Naruto and Hinata's thoughts. That's because I know some of you people out there read this story ONLY for the action, and not for the romance. And for those of you

who are HinataXNaruto fans, here's another little bit to keep you all happy.

And the little bit at the end about Itachi is just foreshadowing what is to come next. Ooooh! I love suspense... even if it does kill me sometimes.

IMPORTANT!

Arigato to all those wonderful people who suggested a title for the third arc of the Faith Series! I am VERY thankful to each and every one of you. I actually received around 29 titles to choose from. XD Anyway, I've looked through all of them and have selected 5 of my favourites, and here they are:

"Trials of Faith"

"Faith Restored"

"Return of the Faithful"

"Giving Faith to all"

"The hope that Faith brings"

Now that I've got it narrowed down to just 5, I would like to ask you all to give me a review on which ones **you** particularly prefer. Once again, thank you all for your participation!

Pursuit V

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After the Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter 8: Pursuit V

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

"xxx XXX xxx" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Warning: PG-13. Once again, there'll probably be a lot of scene jumps. Hope you don't mind. And this time, I'm having a bit more fun poking at the various characters – giving them slightly evil personalities when it comes to torturing the poor sound Nins. XD The Chapter will start off talking about all three (Kiba, Sakura and Ino) Leaf Nins that are left but will eventually end up just concentrating on Sakura Vs Tayuya. Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 8

Kiba sniffed the air above him, trying to identify the various smells his sensitive nose could pick up. "We're catching up." He looked back and answered Sakura in a rather determined but grave tone of voice.

The pinked haired Chuunin could only give him a tight nod in acknowledgement as her mind went off on its own, searching for a

viable plan to use against their enemy. After a moment of consideration, Sakura finally made her mind. "Okay, listen up guys. This is what we'll do!"

Continuing on their Journey towards their home village, Sakon and Tayuya have almost reached their country's borders. Unfortunately, that was exactly the time when fate decided to intervene.

"THUNK!" Tayuya was startled at the sudden shaking of the large barrel of which she carries in her arms.

Sakon looked at her with a raised eyebrow in surprise. "Is it starting yet?" He questioned. "I didn't think it would start so soon..." He murmured as both he and Tayuya stopped in their journey and landed on a sturdy branch, carefully placing down the barrel on a tree to take some time looking over it for any irregularities.

After a long moment of silent analysing, Tayuya finally looked back at Sakon. "No. The seal will hold for a few more minutes at least. But..."

Before she was able to finish what she had started to say, Sakon quickly lifted one of his fingers to his lips, telling her to be silent as he had heard something in the background. Both turned their heads back and silently watched the approach of their enemies.

Upon seeing three of the young Konoha Shinobis still on their tail, Tayuya cursed under her breath. "SHXT! What the hell were those BXXXXXDS doing! If I ever see Kidoumaru and Jiroubou again, I'm gonna skin them alive!" She swore to herself.

Sakura stood proudly and gazed indifferently at the last two Sound guards. Behind her stood both Kiba and Ino; ready and waiting for the signal to start. All three were silent, just waiting patiently for their enemy to make the first move.

Sakon sneered hatefully at the three young kids in front of him, brats just pretending to be ninjas. They simply infuriate him. "Heh! You

think you're so smart, YOU ANNOYING BRATS? I'LL KILL YOU ALL WITHIN SECONDS!" He screamed as he launched himself rapidly towards all three Leaf Nins.

Upon coming closer to the three leaf Nins, Sakon pulled up his right fist and called out his attack: "Taren ken (Match Punch) (1)!" Instantly, his right fist seemed to multiply into several fists all launching in the same direction. The three Konoha Shinobis ducked as best they could but even they couldn't dodge the attack on such a close proximity. However, to Sakon's surprise, his punches seem to pass right through the three Shinobis without inflicting any damage at all. / *WHAT THE HELL! ILLUSIONS!* / Sakon came to this conclusion slightly late.

Just as he decided that all three Shinobis in front of him were nothing but illusions and wanted to head back to protect the Uchiha heir, that was when he noticed a kunai flying towards his direction but wasn't really directed at him. It flew towards the area around his feet. And just when he landed onto the branch of the tree, he heard an ominous spring-like sound. / *SHXT!* / Sakon thought, though he was still too late to react. Straight after the ominous sound of the string being cut by the stray kunai, the camouflaged net directly underneath Sakon's own feet immediately pulled upwards, capturing and containing Sakon within its tight binding. Once the man was firmly confined, all three of the previous illusions slowly faded away, leaving no doubt that they had always been none-existent in the first place.

Some distance away, Sakura was rather amused as she continued to watch the fraying, twisting and cursing form of the grey haired Sound Nin ensnared within her netted trap. / *Hehe. I didn't think he would fall for such an obvious trap. But I guess, even Jounins sometimes underestimate the usefulness of basic survival training. That'll teach him not to underestimate us again. Now, onto the real plan.* / She thought to herself reassuringly as she immediately shifted her attention to the last of the Sound Nins.

Watching as her partner fall into such an obvious trap had Tayuya cursing her head off. She just couldn't believe the type of stupidity that she had to put up with. However, her attention was instantly shifted towards the grey suited boy as he revealed himself.

"HERE I COME!" Kiba yelled as he jumped off a branch further up from Tayuya's current position. "GATSUUGA!" The boy yelled as he performed his favourite Taijutsu move, twirling his body into a deadly, piercing, human drill. Tayuya quickly readied herself in a battle stance, already on the move to pull out her trusty flute, when she suddenly felt a strange sensation on the back of her neck.

"Shintenshin no Jutsu. (Mind Body Switch)" Ino whispered to herself as she directed her attack at the standing figure of Tayuya. The plan had been this, Sakura would find a way to trap the male Shinobi, ensuring that the grey haired man would be unable to interrupt the processions; leaving Kiba to distract the female one. When both enemies were preoccupied, it was Ino's turn to take control of the girl once she was in position behind the red haired Sound Nin, safely within the woman's blind spot. Now that the Jutsu was complete, Ino slowly sunk down and rested against the sturdy tree behind her. As she had already anticipated that there probably won't be anyone to help keep her up and safe, Ino had been particularly careful about choosing a spot to stage her attack.

At the same time as Ino performing the Shintenshin no Jutsu, easily pulling Tayuya's attention away from Kiba, the dog-loving boy easily twisted himself out of his attack mode, grabbed firmly onto the large barrel with Sasuke inside, and immediately started running towards Ino's original body, preparing for the next phase of their plan.

"TAYUYA! WHAT THE FXXK ARE YOU DOING? DON'T JUST STAND THERE! GO AFTER THEM! YOU BXXXH! WHAT THE

FXXK IS WRONG WITH YOU!" Sakon continued to rave and scream in fury, watching (what he presumed to be) Tayuya just standing there, letting the boy get away with Orochimaru's precious container.

To his surprise, Tayuya simply grinned at him unceremoniously. Seeing the unabashed smirk, Sakon's temper boiled over and his curse seal level 1 started activating.

Strictly according to the time plan, Sakura landed lightly next to the still-possessed Tayuya. Speaking in a soft voice, Sakura whispered a note of caution to her friend (within the body of the enemy). "Ino. It looks like the net won't hold that guy back for long, so we have to get out of here as soon as possible. I'll put a Jutsu on the body the second you leave it, okay." With that said, Sakura launched her hands into a familiar set of seals. "Kyosei Suimin no Jutsu. (Forced Sleep Technique)" Nodding to Ino to move. The instant that Tayuya started staying from disorientation, Sakura struck the Sound Nin forcefully, rendering the red-haired woman unconsciously, dropping heavily onto the branch. With a final glance towards how Sakon seem to be ripping his way out of the net trap, Sakura quickly left the scene.

After waking slightly groggily from her Jutsu's effects, Ino gave a sharp and silent nod towards Kiba's raised eyebrow before the two of them also quickly left the scene. Rushing back towards Konoha, the two leaf Nins were soon met up with Sakura, all heading towards the location that they had left Akamaru to set up the last of the defensive traps in the hope of slowing their enemies down if they had managed to escape and come after them.

Back with Sakon and the unconscious Tayuya, Sakon had finally managed to rip his way furiously out of the troublesome net. He glared viciously at the betrayal of his teammate but had also noticed that perhaps Tayuya had been controlled or had been possessed

due to some unknown Jutsu. Orochimaru had warned them of some of the more interesting Jutsus used in Konoha, including one which could take over another person's body and mind. Not to mention that he had felt another Chakra signature not far back, locating behind Tayuya before whatever the possession is had taken place.

Growling to himself, Sakon leaped back towards Tayuya's unmoving body. As badly as he wanted to chase after those hateful leaf Nins and rip them apart; he realised that he would have a better chance of getting the Uchiha boy back with the help of Tayuya, instead of just going by himself.

Upon landing next to his unconscious partner's form, Sakon immediately noted that she was trapped under some kind of sleep Jutsu. After failing to awaken her using a Genjutsu repel technique (and wasting precious time), Sakon decided that he would just activate Tayuya's curse seal manually and force her to break the Jutsu from within. Due to Kimimaro's sudden illness, and his rapid promotion as the leader of the Sound Four, it had become part of Sakon's responsibility to learn how to activate the curse seal's power on each of his team members. As such, he only had to perform a short seal before Tayuya's curse seal instantly reacted to the command.

Once the curse seal level 1 had become active, Tayuya slowly but surely forced her way towards consciousness. Upon finally freeing herself from the influences of the Kyosei Suimin no Jutsu (Forced Sleep), Tayuya snarled lowly to herself, mentally and physically cursing herself for underestimating their enemy and getting caught. "FXXKING AXXHXXX! I'LL FXXKING KILL THEM! THOSE BXXTXXX FXXKXXX!"

"SHUT UP TAYUYA! We don't have anytime for your FXXKING wining! Let's go after them NOW!" Sakon roared his order. And together, the two Sound Nins (with their level 1 curse seals activated) rushed off after the retreating Genins and newly appointed Chuunin of the Leaf.

Kiba sniffed the air upon his nose. Akamaru winced slightly from within his jacket. After setting up various explosive tags and other minor traps here and there, Akamaru had joined back with his master not far back. Sensing the inevitable arrival of their enemy, he decided to tell their leader of the situation at hand immediately. "Hey. Looks like they're out of our traps already. What are we going to do now?" He asked nervously while he looked at Sakura for some more ideas.

Sakura narrowed her eyes and bit her lip in concentration for a moment in time, before she shook herself out of her musings in decision. "Kiba, give Sasuke-kun to Ino. Ino, I want you to bring Sasuke-kun back to Konoha as fast as you can, and if you meet up with any of our previous team mates or Konoha reinforcements, tell them we'll probably still be here needing their assistance."

Seeing as Ino was just about to argue the decision, Sakura jumped in again with her reason. "Ino, you and I both know that you'll still be slightly groggy after your use of the Shintenshin no Jutsu, and not to be rude or anything, but other than your sword skills, there really isn't any other offensive ability that you're really good at. Kiba, on the other hand, at least have a few good offensive moves that he can use against the enemy and I'm pretty good at defensive manoeuvres. So overall, if Kiba, Akamaru and I work together than we could probably stall them for a while before help arrive. However, you have the most important task of bringing Sasuke-kun back to Konoha. The success of our mission lies in your grasp. I'm trusting you with completing this mission, Ino! Don't let me down." Sakura ordered firmly.

Narrowing her eyes in frustration, Ino finally agreed to the order and immediately grabbed firmly onto the barrel that Kiba had just thrown to her. Not even pausing in her stride, Ino continued onwards towards the direction of Konoha while both Sakura and Kiba (with Akamaru) had stopped suddenly on a large tree branch, simply watching her disappear into the distance. Once Ino's figure had

completely vanished into the green foliage of the trees, Kiba turned back towards Sakura.

"So, what's the plan now?" He asked her, knowing that Sakura had become very creative in her plans and strategy.

Sakura gave him a sardonic smirk. "Now, we can do whatever we want, as long as we stall them for as long as possible before reinforcements arrive."

"THAT BXTXH! I'LL KILL HER!" Tayuya continued to swear very loudly as she crushed one tree branch after another the instant her feet touches off them and unexpectedly, she set off another explosion trap. Both Sound Nins instantly avoided the immediate impact zone of the explosion but that did not mean that they came out of it unscathed. In fact, both Tayuya and Sakon seem to be spotting a few more scraps and bruises as they emerged from the smoke of the explosion.

"FXXK!" Sakon roared even as he glared at Tayuya's mistake. "THAT WAS THE FXXKING 9th EXPLOSION trap that you have set off! WHAT ARE YOU! YOU FXXKING IDIOT!"

"SHUT THE FXXK UP! IT'S NOT LIKE YOU'RE DOING ANY BETTER! YOU TWO HEADED AXXHXXX! YOU, YOURSELF, HAD SET OFF AT LEAST 5 TRAPS AS WELL!" Tayuya roared back as the two continued their frustrated banter.

Meanwhile, Sakura and Kiba had already prepared themselves for the onslaught of the angry Sound Nins. Considering their main purpose was to stall the two, Sakura and Kiba decided to split the enemies up and lead them on a merry chase as far from Ino as possible. Once the strategy had been planned and confirmed, both Genin and Chuunin prepared themselves for what would soon become their greatest battle yet.

After accidentally setting off another barrage of explosion traps, of which the initial blast was much larger than both Sakon and Tayuya's expectations, forcing the two to quickly evade it by jumping to opposite sides of the impact zone. With the massive amount of smoke obscuring their view of each other, the next step of the Konoha Shinobi's plan came to fruition. Both Sakon and Tayuya were subjected to seeing the same event happening at the same time but at different locations.

Tayuya watched furiously as two figures, identified as Kiba and Sakura (with Sasuke's barrel in between them) jumped into the distance towards the Eastern end of her location. She didn't even question why they had derailed from their original path towards Konoha, before she set off after them, her temper fuelling her speed. Sakon too, was silently watching another set of Kiba and Sakura (once again carrying Sasuke in between them) running towards the Western region. Without glancing back at his partner, since he just automatically thought that Tayuya would simply follow along, Sakon, too, launched forward in pursuit of the two young Shinobis, never knowing that he had already fallen into their trap.

After running for a while, both Kiba and Sakura suddenly stopped moving and turned back to gaze nonchalantly at Tayuya, who was grinning fiercely at them, thinking that they had finally given up running and had decided to fight instead. However, to her eternal disappointment and shock, both 'Kiba' and the 'barrel' he was holding suddenly disappeared into smoke, leaving only Sakura, who was smirking confidently at her instead. "Well. 'Welcome' said the spider to the fly." Sakura taunted, confirming to Tayuya that she had (yet again) fallen for another one of the Leaf brat's deceptions.

Glaring for all her worth, Tayuya dragged out her flute, ready to assault the annoying little brat at any given moment. Seeing this, Sakura quickly pulled from her pouch several gleaming kunais and launched them at Tayuya, deciding to stop the red haired konoichi before she could even release her attack.

Tayuya easily dodged the first assault but was surprised that all the kunais simply twisted in mid air and returned to strike her again. / *Chakra seeking kunais?* / Tayuya correctly concluded was she managed to dodge all of them again, before quickly biting her thumb, completing a quick set of hand seals (all in mid air) before landing lightly onto a near by branch (far away enough from the kunais) and began her technique: "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! Mouhogosha! (Summoning Technique: Blind Guardians)" (2)

Instantly, three large humanoid creatures emerged from the summoning smoke. The one on the left had no arms, with its neck twisted in such a way that it faces up instead of down like a normal human's, with spikes seemingly attached to its head, and its entire upper body (including part of its head) was covered by bandages. The creature in the middle wore black clothes similar to Tayuya's own, however, it has holding a very large mallet in its right hand, and had such long hair that it covered up its face completely. The last one on the right was blind with a small bandage wrapped around its eyes. What Sakura found interesting was that the only similarity between the three was that all three of them had their mouths sewn together.

"Now... I'll play a melody of death for you." Tayuya stated confidently as she lifted her flute to her lips and started playing a haunting melody that struck Sakura's very nerves.

The creepy notes chilled Sakura's very spine, even while the three monsters swayed drunkenly to the music. Not taking her eyes off her enemy, Sakura mentally commanded her Chakra controlled kunais to turn back and strike towards Tayuya again, only to be stopped by one of the arms of those three monsters. Once all the kunais were firmly stuck onto the bandaged arm, Sakura gave up the notion of using her weapons, at least, until she knows what these monsters were capable of.

Suddenly, with a switch of notes, the three monsters disappeared from behind Tayuya. Instinctively, Sakura jumped and narrowly dodged the mallet of one of the monsters, which smashed up the

branch she had just been standing on. Another of those monsters sliced the tree in half where she had just stood. / *SHXT! She's controlling them with her flute! They seem to be blind and mute, so that means that she's commanding them using sound!* / She concluded accurately while her mind raced onwards, trying to find any openings she could attack.

As Sakura continued to dodge this way and that, she realised that the three creatures were pushing her further and further away from her target and enemy. / *Damn! If this continues, then sooner or later, they're gonna get lucky and I'm gonna end up dead! Can't let that happen. I have to stall them long enough for Ino to get back! Failure is NOT an OPTION!* / For the first time in a long time, Inner Sakura and outer Sakura agreed on this point.

Finding a short moment of reprieve from the attacking fiends, Sakura quickly performed her own set of hand seals, with several puffs of smoke, she had created around 5 Gen Bunshins (illusionary clones) before performing another set of seals to cloak herself in an invisibility Jutsu. The clones were summoned all with the purpose of stalling the large creatures, giving the real Sakura some time to think up a strategy to counter Tayuya's assault.

"Heh. Genjutsu huh... Well, I'll just kill off each and every one of your clones before I find you and then slaughter you, you little BXXXXH!" Tayuya swore as she narrowed her eyes in anger, watching as all five clones dodge her summons again and jump towards five different directions. "Heh. No one has ever survived after listening to this melody of death, and I'll show you why. The final ninth verse... Makyō no ran (The haunt of Pandemonium)!" (3) Tayuya finished before she struck up her flute on a higher note, far more chilling than the original melody, this time, the song was damn near terrifying.

Noticing the change, the invisible Sakura tensed in anticipation. / *Something bad is going to happen next. I just know it. Something's coming... /*

As the music of the flute changes, so to did the movement of the three summons. They flinched and shifted in slight unconformability for a moment before something happened, something unimaginable. Suddenly, several ripping sound of strings can be heard through out the forest, and an instant after that, all three monster's mouth sprung open, releasing a strange, long, whitish, almost transparent 'things'. Stretching forward, these weird tentacles launched themselves towards three of Sakura's clones, passing through trees and branches standing in their way.

*/ NO FXXKING WAY! THEY **PASSED** THROUGH TREES! HOW THE HELL AM I SUPPOSE TO FIGHT THEM IF THEY'RE NOT PHYSICAL? /* Sakura panicked as she continued to watch what these new additions to the summons were able to do.

Covering the distance between themselves and the clones, the foam-like tentacles suddenly opened its supposed mouth, revealing razor sharp teeth inside; ready to snap at anything it could catch within its jaws. There was just one mouth at the tip of the tentacles either; there were several – one of the tip, and others on the sides of the tentacle. Overall, it makes the ghost-like member look incredibly creepy and horrifying. Finally closing the gap between itself and its prey, the jaws of the first tentacle sank its teeth into the first clone, only for the clone itself to puff out of existence. The two other targeted clones similarly disappeared.

Sakura's eyes widened at the implications of the tentacle's usage. */ They... they eat away Chakra! They consume physical energy! That's why the clones disappeared if a single bit was taken out of them. With a single touch, and having the 'physical energy' part of their Chakra system sucked away, the clones instantly become unstable and simply burst into non-existence. Since these tentacles can pass through trees, it means that they aren't 'physical' in a sense. They must have been made from something refine and weightless. It's like they're nothing but Chakra, completely intent on feeding. Most likely, they're imbued with Chakra from Spiritual energy. That's why they crave physical energy to maintain their stability. SXXT! These things*

are DANGEROUS! / (4) Sakura thought to herself even while maintaining her invisibility Genjutsu.

Ino held onto the barrel as firmly as she could, jumping from branch to branch, without ever looking back at the two comrades she had literally abandoned in order to complete the mission. */ Don't you dare die! Sakura-forehead!* / She cursed mentally to herself.

Even though Ino knew exactly how important her return to Konoha with Sasuke-kun was, she still couldn't help feeling that she had made the biggest mistake in her life by accepting Sakura's orders and abandoning her friends. Though she wasn't really close to Kiba or any of the other team members of their rag-tag group, but she had felt that there was something that held them together – as Konoha Shinobis, as comrades, they were supposed to live and die together. To be forced to leave behind her comrades, it made her feel simply awful.

However, Ino was abruptly brought out of her musings when she suddenly met up with Shikamaru and Haku on their way towards following them. "Shikamaru? Haku-san?" Ino squeaked in surprise, not really registering that they were reinforcements.

"Ino! Are you okay? Where are the others?" Shikamaru immediately took command, seeing as he was still the leader of their gang during the initial phases.

Snapping out of her relieved musing, Ino gave Shikamaru a brief report on what had happened to her, Sakura, Kiba and Akamaru since they had separated. "After we left you, Haku-san and Chouji to deal with that fat guy, we caught up with the Sound enemies. However, one of them stayed behind to stall us and we had no choice but to leave Neji and Tenten to deal with that six-armed freak, so that the rest of us my go after Sasuke-kun again. After catching up with them for a third time, we managed to trap that two-headed freak, placed a sleeping Jutsu on the red head and left with Sasuke-kun. However, it seems that both of them had broken out of our traps

and came after us. To stall them, Sakura and Kiba had stayed back, leaving me to take Sasuke-kun (who is inside this barrel) to return back to Konoha on my own." Ino concluded quickly, already awaiting Shikamaru's orders as to what to do next.

After listening to her explanations, Shikamaru decided on the next course of action, still keeping in mind Kaga-san's warning before. "Well, we've already met up with Neji and Tenten. They've already defeated their enemy and remained fine but due to their exhaustion and minor injuries, they won't be able to catch up to us so I ordered them to go back to Konoha. Chouji is also under the same boat." Though not exactly a lie, Shikamaru did leave out some crucial information in his explanation to Ino (which Haku immediately picked up but decided to stay quiet). / *What she doesn't know can't hurt her...* / This was Shikamaru's mental reasoning.

"I agree with Sakura's decision. You should continue going back and bring Sasuke with you. Haku and I will catch up with both Sakura and Kiba to help them out." Shikamaru completed his orders to Ino, who could only nod tightly in reply.

Once everything had settled, both Haku and Shikamaru continued on with their journey, this time catching up to both Sakura and Kiba whom they knew would probably be in need of their help right about now. Ino, still standing silently as she watched the backs of both boys disappear into the foliage, could only pray silently to herself and hope for their safe return. / *Please... Please be safe everyone.* / She mentally prayed to herself once more before she too, turned back towards her original direction and started running towards home, towards Konoha.

Once both boys were unable to detect Ino's presence in the distance, they made their own plans as to what they must do next. "According to Kaga-san, Sakura headed her enemy off towards the East and Kiba to the west. Which one do you think we should go after first?" Shikamaru decided to ask even while he continued to jump from branch to branch.

Haku answered back seriously without needed much thought. "I've taught Sakura before and I know of her strengths and weaknesses, she will not be so rash as to get herself into a fix she can't get herself out of. I have confidence in her. I will go after Kiba-kun to the west."

"Fine, but just to be sure, I will go and check out Sakura. Once we've defeated our enemy, just leave them as is and return to Konoha. If one of us is late, we won't wait for the other, understand?"

Shikamaru stated firmly, knowing that there really wasn't any more time for compromise or waiting. Action must be taken and it must be taken now.

Haku responded with a tight nod in reply and instantly, both boys departed from one another heading towards different directions – Shikamaru to the East, and Haku to the West.

After a few minutes of watching how the summons and their ever-elongating tentacle continue to chase after her remaining clones and eventually destroying them, Sakura contemplated what she could do to defeat her enemy. */ I have to avoid those summons at all cost while concentrating on reaching the Sound Nin. Since she's controlling them with her flute, I must get close enough to destroy that annoying instrument. But... with her summons standing between us, it's extremely difficult for me to go after her. There really is nothing I can do against the summons; I don't think they'll fall for my Genjutsu techniques either... wait a minute. She commands them by using 'sound' right... /* A mischievous smile found its way onto Sakura's mouth.

/ If there's a way for me to disrupt their 'hearing' of the sound, then she won't be able to control them anymore, right! Hopefully this will work. / Sakura thought to herself desperately as she manoeuvred herself to another 'safe' spot (still cloaked in invisibility) before starting another set of seals, hoping against hope that it would work against those strange creatures.

/ Where is that little shxt head? / Tayuya thought to herself as she glanced around the trees and leaves warily. */ The little brat has been hiding way to long... but no matter, with this Jutsu on, I can go on for a very long time. Sooner or later, the little bxxxh will make a mistake and she's all mine to butcher however I want. /* Tayuya thought gleefully to herself.

Just then, a kunai was launched from somewhere to the left of her. Tayuya was startled somewhat but since the kunai wasn't launched AT her, it struck somewhere to her right. However, to her surprise, there was an explosion note attached to the kunai, so a few seconds after the initial impact of the kunai landing on the bark of the tree, the explosion ignited, blasting out a large cloud of smoke, obscuring Tayuya's field of vision.

/ Now! / Sakura thought to herself as she released her slow going jutsu. "Mukaku no Jutsu! (Blind Senses Technique)" Sakura whispered as she directed her Chakra towards all three of the summoned creatures, desperately hoping that her Jutsu actually works.

Pausing in the playing of her flute, Tayuya jumped upwards, twisted out of the cloud of smoke and landed lightly onto another tree. She looked around for a while before she was again startled by the sudden appearance of the pink haired konoichi from the Leaf, landing onto the same branch as her. "Heh, finally decided to show yourself, huh? You sewer rat!" Tayuya taunted even while her fingers quickly flew over her flute, playing the correct tunes to direct her summoned creatures to do her bidding.

However, to her shock and surprise, nothing happened. She quickly took a moment to glance towards her three monsters, whom simply stood stiffly where they had been a few moments ago, not moving at all. She tried the flute again, to no avail. For some reason, her summons were not reacting to her command at all. */ WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON? /* Tayuya's panicked mind screamed.

However, Tayuya wasn't given any further chance to ponder the strange situation at hand. Noticing that her plan had worked, Sakura quickly launched herself into another set of seals. / *Kishibari no Jutsu! (Tree Bind Technique)* / Sakura silently thought to herself as she completed the Jutsu. Immediately after the completion of the seals, her body drifted into nothingness, fading from existence.

/ *Genjutsu?* / Tayuya accurately predicted but was soon on the edge as she suddenly found herself sinking into the tree branch she had been standing on before. Before long, two large branches stretched out from the one that she had been standing on and wrapped around her firmly. Completely trapped by the strange tree-like creation, Tayuya was again surprised when Sakura slowly emerged from the very trunk of the 'tree' above her head.

"Now, to get rid of your primary weapon first." Sakura stated as she forced her way onto Tayuya's left hand (which was gripping on to her flute).

Scared at the possibility of losing her beloved flute, Tayuya instantly started retaliating against the Genjutsu user. "You will NOT touch my flute, you PINK AXXED BXXXH!" She screamed as she gripped her flute tightly.

Annoyed at being interrupted, Sakura lifted several senbons and struck several of them into Tayuya's left arm, striking various sensitive nervous points on her arm, instantly releasing the tension among Tayuya's hand. Quickly grabbing onto the flute from the immobile hand of Tayuya, Sakura quickly threw it away as far as she could see. Outer Sakura was relieved that now, her enemy wasn't able to control those freaky monsters anymore, while inner Sakura was mentally dancing a victory dance. / *Now for the finale!* /

Shocked and angered at the pink haired konoichi's actions, Tayuya's temper finally boiled over. / **THE LITTL SHXT WILL DIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEE!** / Her curse seal level two finally activated.

Sakura, having just sensed the sudden increase in chakra capacity in her capture, tried desperately to hold the Sound Nin trapped. Unfortunately, there was just too much Charka to hold back. Deciding that it was best for her to retreat now, Sakura quickly detached herself from the enraged white-horned, red-haired Sound Nin.

Within a split second of having her Chakra flaring wildly, Tayuya easily broke her way out of the Genjutsu trap and glared furiously at the brat in front of her.

Sakura eyed Tayuya warily, immediately noting the new additions to Tayuya's appearance as well as her increased Chakra capacity as NOT a good sign for her. */ Shxt! This isn't looking good for me at all! /* Sakura cursed mentally.

However, before the now transformed Tayuya could start her attack, both combatants became suddenly aware of the three previously summoned creatures, whom were now free of Sakura's Mukaku no Jutsu (Blind Senses Technique). */ FXXK! /* The thought went through both konoichi's mind as the three summons suddenly started attacking both of them, as they body have an abundance of 'physical energy' for it to consume.

/ AH FXXK! WITHOUT MY FLUTE, I CAN'T COMMAND THEIR MOVEMENTS. THEY'RE GONNA BE GOING AFTER ANYTHING THAT MOVES! / Tayuya thought frantically to herself before she finally decided that fighting WITHOUT them would be far easier than fighting WITH them. "TAI! (Retreat)" Tayuya called out as she held up a unique hand seal. Right after her command, all three summoned creatures disappeared into clouds of smoke, returning to wherever they came from.

/ Phew... at least I forced her to get read of her summons AND her flute. Now it's even ground for the both of us. / Sakura thought to herself, slightly relieved that she didn't have to deal with those strange monsters again. However, Sakura's relief was short lived.

Once her summons were gone and dealt with, Tayuya instantly turned her focus onto the tired konoichi before her. Rushing towards her opponent, Tayuya managed to punch Sakura right in her stomach with Chakra enforced strength, with enough force to slam Sakura into a tree some distance away before sliding down onto a branch underneath her, already coughing up a lot of blood out. "You will PAY for touching my flute, you snot nosed little bxxxh! I want you to be screaming and begging for death before the day ends." Tayuya growled lowly, already dreaming of all the schemes she could inflict on the pathetic Nin in front of her.

Struggling onto her hands and knees while continuing to cough up lots of blood, Sakura thought miserable to herself that at least there was one thing good that had come out of all this pain. / *She's completely forgotten about Sasuke-kun. At least now, Ino will be safe as well.* / Her thoughts were cut short however when a large, clawed hand gripped her throat tightly and dragged her off her feet before slamming her into the large tree trunk again.

"However, I still need to go after your little friend and the Uchiha. Too bad I won't have the time to rip you piece by piece but at least you'll know you've FAILED." Tayuya taunted and tightened her grip with an incredibly high pressure.

Sakura continued to choke and gasp, desperate for air. Clawing at her enemy's hand and frantically kicking her opponent's legs and chest; but all to no avail. Sakura could feel her heart beat racing due to her panicked state but there was nothing she could do. She couldn't BREATHE! She was gasping but no air was actually entering her lungs. She could feel her heart constrict more and more due to the slowly decreasing oxygen reaching the rest of her body. Darkness slowly pickled at the edges of her vision. / *I... I don't want to die... I don't want to die...I don't WANT TO DIE!* / Sakura thought to herself desperately but she couldn't think of anything to do. Just when she was about to give up all her hopes, a familiar voice called out her name and brought her back to the reality at hand.

"SAKURA!" Shikamaru yelled as he quickly performed his favourite technique, entrapping Tayuya in his Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Bind Technique) and minutely forced Tayuya's hand to loosen her grip. Loosening the woman's grip enough for Sakura to slide down onto the branch and laying unconscious, Shikamaru had to fight his sudden panicked sensation before he convinced himself that he HAD arrived in time, and that Sakura WOULD be all right. Forcing his frantic emotions down, Shikamaru determinately focused all his attention on the now horned Tayuya.

"Che... Kill one rat and another takes its place." Tayuya taunted even while she continued to struggle against the boy's shadow bind by increasing her Chakra capacity again.

/ Damn it! She's growing more and more powerful. How is this possible? At this rate, she's gonna break out of my shadow bind and kill both of us easily. I have to do something! / Shikamaru analysed to himself before deciding on the next course of action. Going through a small set of hand seals, Shikamaru concentrated on manipulating his chakra to do what he wants it to do. "Ninpou: Kage Kubi Shibari no Jutsu! (Ninja Art: Shadow Neck Choke Technique!)" (5)

A dark, clawed hand, completely made out of shadows, slowly climbed its way up Tayuya's body, before finally reaching its destination – Tayuya's neck. The shadow hand gripped onto Tayuya's neck tightly and tried to do what the Sound Nin had tried to do to Sakura. */ What the hell! HE's grabbing onto my body using Shadows! It's like being grabbed with real hands! /* Tayuya choked slightly due to the pressure being pressed onto her neck but she refused to back down and die in such a humiliating way. */ I WILL NOT LET YOU WIN! /*

With a burst of determination and Chakra, Tayuya somehow managed to force the Shadow hand to release its grip on her neck slightly. With patience and pure stubbornness, Tayuya slowly but surely retracted the steps of the Shadow neck bind technique from her body – first her neck, then her chest, and now, it's lingering

somewhere on her thigh. "Hehe. Sooner or later, kid, you're gonna run out of Chakra and then I'll skin both of you alive!" Tayuya threatened in a deep, snarling voice.

/ SHIT! I can't hold up much longer! I'm already at my limit for all of today's fights. / Shikamaru thought to himself despairingly. */ I can't give up. I need to protect Sakura from her. I need to complete the mission by stalling her and give Ino as much time to return to Konoha as possible. I can't give up now. /* Even though these thoughts were going through Shikamaru's head, the analytical part of his mind calculated that it was simply impossible to escape out of this situation unharmed. */ But I can't think of anything that can get us out of this. I... I can't win... /* Just as Shikamaru was about to fall into despair since he had finally reached the end of his limit, breaking the Shadow bind technique and releasing Tayuya to do whatever she wants; their reinforcements finally arrived.

A burst of cyclonic wind slammed against Tayuya's now free body and pushed her far away from Sakura's collapsed form and Shikamaru's exhausted body. Surprised at the unexpected help, Shikamaru immediately looked up to find their saviour, whom happened to be none other than Temari of the Sand. "Te... Temari?" He stuttered out, completely bewildered that she would suddenly appear out of nowhere to save his but.

"Who the FXXK ARE YOU!" Tayuya swore as she gripped tightly onto a near by branch, trying to hold on so that she doesn't get blown away by the wind force.

"Allies of the Leaf, Shinobis of the Sand. Temari...at your service." Temari answered confidently, leaning slightly on her beloved fan.

Somewhere far away in two different locations, two other people repeated almost the exact same thing as Temari; both were from the Sand.

"W... Why are you here? Were you ordered by the new Hokage to come after us?" Shikamaru asked nervously, he was still unsure of the situation at hand.

"Nope." Temari shrugged nonchalantly. "We were asked by Kaga-san and the Lady Oracle to come and save your butts." She smirked confidently at him. "It seems as if they don't trust that you could handle yourselves in this mission. And it seems they're right." She taunted gleefully. She was fully aware that Shikamaru had been glaring slightly behind her back.

"So... What's the situation here, you smart-ass? Gonna give me any hints as to her weaknesses and strengths?" Temari continued to taunt the boy.

Shikamaru only shook his head in slight annoyance. "I have no idea of her actual abilities. I only just got here a few minutes before you did. Sakura, over there..." He nodded towards Sakura's crumbled form. "... had been her opponent for most of the fight and I hadn't seen what the enemy can do yet. However, considering they had been fighting for a while now, I would assume that Sakura had gone to the trouble of cornering the Sound Nin to the best of her ability. I have confidence that Sakura had been able to push the Sound Nin until she's close to her limit by now."

"So basically. You're telling me you don't have a fxxking clue." Temari concluded, slightly annoyed at the lack of information.

"Heh... I'm sure you can handle it." Shikamaru taunted back playfully, delighted to see Temari glare back at him slightly. (6) It was really strange, their relationship. Even though he had known that the Sand konoichi had originally been part of the plan to invade of the Leaf and destroy it, he still couldn't blame her too much, since she hadn't really participated in the battle at all. Shikamaru had heard from Naruto afterwards about his fight against Gaara and how that ended, as well as Kaga-san's sudden proposal to the Sand siblings. He was one of the few people who HAD known that the three genins had stayed under the protection of the Lady Oracle and Kaga-san for the

first few days after the invasion. Hell, he was one of the two people who were actually allowed to visit them.

During their few limited times together (after their original Chuunin Exam battle), a sort of strange rivalry had developed between him and Temari. To be truthful, Temari was stronger than him, both physically and emotionally. He had known that the only thing he had above her was his mental capacities. However, that still didn't stop them from instigating short arguments whenever they were in each other's presence. Strange as it may seem, Shikamaru actually (though he'll never admit it) enjoy these quick-witted retorts between himself and Temari, even though he did find them rather troublesome overall.

"Che." Temari snorted back in an unladylike manner. "Well, they say a good defence is a good offence, so why don't I just be the first to let the ball roll." She muttered to herself before she pulled her fan back in a dramatic pose. "DAI KAMAITACHI! (Great Slashing Wind Technique!)" Temari called forth as she swung her fan sideways, creating a huge gust of slashing wind flying rapidly towards the Sound Nin, slicing any trees or branches standing in its way.

/ SHIT! I don't have anything to defend ME! / Tayuya swore to herself and slashing winds reached her, pulling her off her feet and slitting multiple gashes onto her body. She finally slammed onto an uncut tree, knocking her head unconscious, before plummeting all the way to the ground and landing heavily. Her curse seal level two slowly receded back to its dormant state, leaving Tayuya completely vulnerable to any attack.

Both Shikamaru and Temari's eyebrows rose to their foreheads at the fallen Sound Nin, and they gapped openly at their sudden victory. "Well..." Temari finally murmured after a few seconds of awkward silence. "That was simple enough." She could hear Shikamaru snorted irritably behind her and she smiled in reply. Turning around and gazing at him, Temari gave him her winning smile. "What are you gonna say to that? I can't believe you were having problems with her! How weak are you?" She taunted gleefully.

Shikamaru turned his head away from her and grunted in annoyance, rolled his eyes and shook his head slightly in exasperation. Finally deciding to admit defeat, he looked back at her with a soft smile on his face. It spoke more about his feelings of appreciation than he could ever express in words. And with that, the two of them silently gathered the unconscious Sakura before leaving back towards Konoha. They looked back one last time, just in time to see Tayuya's body disappear into a flat plane of shadows underneath her, obviously conjured into existence by none other than Kaga-san.

Though curious about his master's actions, Shikamaru still didn't inquire about Temari's role in all of this. He trusted his master to do all he can in protecting those close to 'Naruto-sama', and therefore, anything else is just on a need-to-know basis. However, the concept of owing Temari his life was somewhat unsettling in Shikamaru's mind, so he pushed it aside as far as possible. The future will bring what it will bring; there was no point in worrying about it.

Upon finding an appropriate location to fight, Kiba, whom is currently using Henge no Jutsu to pretend to be Sakura (carrying the barrel) dispelled his simply illusion, leaving both him and Akamaru (who is in his humanoid form) completely revealed from their disguises. Some distance behind them, Sakon finally realised that he had been tricked and had pursued the wrong group, and as such, was raging with righteous fury.

"Come on, Akamaru. We'll end this quick by attacking from both sides. He won't know what hit him." Kiba encouraged, and Akamaru (in Kiba's form) growled in acceptance. Both were already in their Jyuujin form (Beast form) so it was a simple process of getting into position and then launching their attack. Once in position, Kiba simply announced his attack: "GATSUUGA!"

In a split second after both Kiba and Akamaru launched themselves at Sakon using the Gatsuuga (Peircing Fang) technique, they found

their wrists grabbed forcefully from both front and back end of Sakon's body.

"WHAT THE!" Kiba muttered in shock while Akamaru (in Kiba's form) could only whimper slightly as the claws holding its wrists tightened considerably. While Akamaru was at the front of Sakon's face, struggling to get free from his grasp, Kiba was staring almost in awe of an almost identical face of Sakon BEHIND Sakon's back, with two EXTRA arms grabbing onto his own wrists.

"Sakon. What are you doing?" The face in front of Kiba growled lowly. "We don't have time to play with these pathetic insects; we still have to retrieve the Uchiha brat for Orochimaru-sama. Be serious for once and finish them quickly." With that said an extra 'foot' seem to emerge from the small of Sakon's back and struck Kiba directly in his stomach, pushing him some distance away.

"As you wish, Nisama." Sakon whined slightly but accepted his brother's commands. Akamaru was treated to the same treatment but instead of being kicked, it was pulled forward and then punched towards the general direction of where Kiba had landed on another branch.

Kiba and Akamaru could only watch in amazement as BOTH identical heads on Sakon's body realigned itself to the FRONT, simply facing them. The black, dotted spots on Sakon's body seem to enlarge, completely covering Sakon's whole body. Horns seem to elongate from both of Sakon's heads. And when the transformation is complete, the only word to describe what had become of Sakon is 'monster'.

"Heheh. You shouldn't be so shocked. My older brother – Ukon, and I share the same body, even though my Nisama (Big Brother) usually stays asleep most of the time. This is our bloodline limit ability." Sakon, on the left taunted the boy and dog mercilessly.

"Enough. Let's finish them off quickly. We need to go as soon as possible." Ukon, on the right stated savagely, grinning like a mad

man with his large sharp teeth.

With that said, Sakon and Ukon moved at incredibly high speeds towards the dog and boy, before launching another barrage of punches and kicks at them. "TAREN KEN! (MATCH PUNCH)" Sakon called he pulled off multiple punches on one end. "TAREN KYAKU (MATCH KICK)" Ukon growled out as he performed a multi-kick towards their target on the other end.

Upon being flung by the combination of technique, slamming into another tree before managing to land on a stable branch, both Kiba and Akamaru huffed and puffed in exhaustion. "Ow. Shxt!" Kiba cursed softly to himself before he shifted his gaze to Akamaru. "So, aibou (partner), have any ideas as to how we can defeat them."

Akamaru gave a series of determined barks in reply. Kiba widened his eyes in slightly shock. "What? *THAT* Jutsu? But it'll be too dangerous when we don't have anyone around to support us. If we use it, we'll be completely out of Chakra afterwards." Another set of loud and animated barks flowed out of Akamaru's mouth, ending in a low growling noise. After hearing his companion's words, Kiba stood silent for a few seconds, contemplating whether he should follow through with the plan or not. But after a while, he made up his mind. "You right, Akamaru. No risks taken then no treasures gained. Let's do it."

"Heh. Whatever you're planning, we won't let you succeed!" Sakon called out as he rushed towards the two at high speed again.

Standing up straight, Kiba and Akamaru readied themselves to perform one of their greatest techniques. Jumping away at the last minute of Sakon's assault, Kiba called out to Akamaru. "Now! Akamaru." Akamaru acknowledged his command with a bark before releasing all his urine on top of Sakon and Ukon before jumping away towards his master again.

Landing on another large tree branch with Akamaru atop his head, Kiba cheered. "Okay, the first stage – Dynamic Marking, Complete!

Now on to the next stage." Performing his seals, Kiba manipulated his Chakra to finish the Jutsu. "Inuzuka Ryuu Combi Henge! (Inuzuka Beast Combination Transformation)" A large smoke erupted from the location of Kiba and Akamaru. As the smoke cleared, there stood a HUGE two headed white dog in their place, with jaws open showing very sharp teeth and slobbering everywhere with their saliva. / *SOUTOUROU (Two Headed Wolf) complete! Now for GAROUGA! (Double Wolf Fang)* / The two headed dog jumped off its perch, spun around at incredible speed, creating a super spin and a deadly spear aimed at piercing its intended target, which it did.

Following the scent of Sakon and Ukon, Kiba was slightly surprised that the two had suddenly separated, but since he couldn't see them anyway, he concluded that he should hit one of the scents only, believing that the other was probably a Bunshin or something like that. Smashing face first into what he could only assume as Sakon, Kiba and Akamaru spent a several seconds just drilling into Sakon's flesh and body, before finally slamming their enemy into the heart of a tree trunk, drilling him further until he completely meshed into the tree. Finally done with their attack, the two-headed dog jumped backwards to look at their accomplishment. To their surprise, they only found an unconscious, bleeding and practically broken, ONE-headed Sakon.

"Just because we're usually in the same body, DOESN'T mean we can't separate! Don't underestimate us, boy!" A voice roared out behind him but Kiba and Akamaru was too late to react when Ukon (or what they assumed to be Ukon) landed on their back (the 2 headed dog's back) and smashed a kunai into one of the eyes of a dog. With a massive roar of pain from the white furred dog, a burst of smoke revealed the dispersed, individual forms of Kiba and Akamaru lying on separate tree branches.

"AKAMARU!" Kiba yelled in concern as he found one of Akamaru's eyes bleeding profusely, even while the kunai was no longer in it. Struggling to his knees, Kiba collapsed again, suddenly realising that

he's completely out of Chakra after his last move (the Soutourou and Garouga) and was completely helpless.

"Now, you will pay for what you did to my younger brother!" A deep voice threatened from right beside Kiba. Kiba turned around only to see the fearsome face of Ukon right on his shoulder. Instinctively reacting to a threat, Kiba tried to punch Ukon's face only to have his left arm caught and pulled back by Ukon's claws, which seemingly formed from his very own jacket.

"This is MY special ability. You should have learnt about Chakra pathways by now, how they are interconnected to your organs, tissues, cells and even the proteins used to create cells. Well, during my curse seal level two form, I am able to disassemble and reconstruct these very cells with my chakra. Simply put, I can smash my original body into pieces and then get inside an enemy's body. Then I am able to reconstruct everything (the cells in my body) back to the way it was and get outside, without ever been harmed. My cells are able to swim freely in your body, and are able to make just a portion of your cells just for me. Basically, we're fused together in the same body. This ability enables me to assassinate my targets without ever leaving a single clue, slowly tearing away at the very cells that make up your body." Ukon sneered threateningly at Kiba, scaring the boy more than he showed.

Kiba glared at the red skinned freak now residing on his left shoulder with a combination of fear, hatred and a deep sense of determination. *I won't let you win. I refuse to lose to you. You will pay for what you did to Akamaru! I swear it!* This was the only thought running through Kiba's mind at the moment when he finally made a decision on how to defeat Ukon. "Heh. You said we were in the same body, huh?" Without waiting for a reply, Kiba picked up a kunai from his pouch with his free, right hand and instantly stabbed himself in the stomach with it.

"AHH!" Ukon shouted in shocked pain as he also felt the stabbing agony running within the boy's body. "Suicide? Impossible!" The

Sound guardian gritted his teeth and gurgled the words out unwillingly.

"Heh... There's more where that comes from." Kiba's narrowed eyes focused solely on Ukon's face when he dragged the kunai about of his stomach region and made to stab it once again, only to have Ukon suddenly dragging himself away from the boy in fear of having him inflict more damage than already done.

"You FXXKING CHILD!" Ukon roared in anger as he dragged himself to his feet, clutching onto the kunai he had used to blind the dog in the previous fight, he quickly composed himself and lunged towards the now immobile boy with hatred in his eyes. "DIE!"

Kiba closed his eyes in inevitability. */ I'm sorry, Akamara, Neechan (Big Sister), Okachan (Mother). Forgive me for not coming home. /* However, he didn't feel anything at all, no pain. That was when he opened his eyes in shock as the vision before him finally registers in his mind.

"Hold still, Kiba-kun. I'm gonna stop the bleeding as much as I can, but you have to stay still!" Haku called out frantically to the boy even while he pulled forth as much Chakra as he has in reserve to stop the massive bleeding puncture wound on Kiba's stomach area.

"Akamaru... Please help Akamaru." Kiba could only plead with Haku as he was starting to feel dizzy due to blood lost and shock.

"Okay, I promise I'll look after Akamaru for you, once I've got this bleeding dealt with first, Okay?" Haku reassured the boy as much as possible.

"Who... who is fighting Ukon now?" Kiba whimpered slightly as Haku pressed hard against his wound.

Haku gave him a reassuring smile. "See for yourself."

Turning his head, Kiba made it just in time to see Ukon get trapped in one of Kankuro's weird puppets – one that looked like a horned horse head with six arms (Kuroari – Black Ant), and have the other puppet (Karasu – Crow) break up into its various sections and jammed straight into the other puppet's slots. He stared in shock at how the Sand Shinobi could so easily defeat his enemy. "And the play ends." Kankuro muttered under his breath as if it was his concluding thought.

Turning around nonchalantly, Kankuro gazed disdainfully at Kiba. "Che. Leaf Shinobis are weak." He stated it as if it was fact, which of course, boiled over Kiba's temper.

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST SAY? WE LEAF NINS AREN'T WEAK! HELL, I EVEN DEFEATED THE OTHER FREAK – SAKON BY MYSELF! YOU JUST WON SO EASILY BECAUSE YOUR GUY WAS ALREADY TIRED FROM FIGHTING AGAINST ME! YOU PUPPET LOVING, MAKE-UP WEARING FFFFFRRRREEEEAAAANKKKK!" Kiba screamed at the top of his voice, probably bursting another blood vessel somewhere in his body.

Kankuro could only follow up with a small chuckle that soon blossomed into an uncontrolled laugh, which only made Kiba even more furious. While Kiba continued to rant at the Sand Shinobi about his greatness, Haku took the time to look over Akamaru. He may not be a vet or anything like that, but even he could heal some minor bruises and cuts. However, he wasn't so sure about whether the dog's injured eye is salvageable or not, but he didn't wrap a bandage around it for now.

With the three so busy with their own things, none of them noticed that a black shadow hand enraptured the unmoving body of Sakon and disappeared into nothingness. Same with Ukon's body which was lying inside the container of Kuroari (Black Ant), whom is now missing too.

After a while of calming down, all tree decided that it was time to head back. Carrying both of his puppets, Kankuro was also forced to

carry Kiba's injured dog as well, since Haku was busy carrying Kiba himself. So, all three left on their journey back to Konoha, each with their own thoughts and their own feelings.

(End)

(1) Translation by Anbu/Aone, episode 118

(2) Translation taken from Narutofan.

(3) Translation by Aone, episode 120

(4) For those of you who don't understand what the hell I'm talking about (even though I copied that practically word for word off the episode). Basically, we all know that 'Chakra' is a combination energy that is made up of **BOTH** 'Spiritual energy' (which is created by the mind), and 'Physical energy' (which translate to 'stamina' and physical strength). The white tentacle thingy's are mainly made up of 'Chakra' with more 'Spiritual energy' than 'physical energy'. That is why – to remain stable and in existence' - they crave 'physical energy' that exists outside of themselves.

(5) Translation by Aone, episode 122

(6) Heh. A bit of ShikamaruXTemari! If they do build a relationship later on in the story, this is probably the way I'll start it. First, it'll begin as a friendly competition between the two before it blossoms into something more. I don't know whether I will have this pairing or not. It really depends. What do you guys prefer?

Finally got this chapter finished. Now I know that all of you are just DYING to know what happens next – especially to Ino when Sasuke finally breaks out of his confinement. Well, I can tell you that since there is NO Kimimaro and NO Lee in my story line, the only one left to defend Ino would be... *drum roll* ... GAARA! So yeah, hope you all enjoyed this chapter (I know that the Kiba bit was a bit repetitive from

the Cannon series but I just wasn't feeling creative enough to conjure anything), but the rest of it was okay – I think.

Well, on to the other news - the votes are finally in. "Trials of Faith" is the determined title for the final Arc in the Faith series. I have to give a sincere 'THANK YOU' to every single person who had read this story, was interested enough to actually post a review, and most of all, to those who participated in the voting of the new title.

Thank you all for your continual support and encouragement, even though sometimes I do take too long to post a chapter. It's simply invigorating to know that people really do read this story of mine and actually appreciate it. Thank you all soooooo very much, and please continue to read and review. That's all from me! See you all next chapter!

Pursuit VI

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After the Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter 9: Pursuit VI and Finally Home.

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

"xxx XXX xxx" Change of Scene, time passed, change of point of view

Warning: PG-13. For those of you who still don't know, yes, this series WILL be NarutoXHinata; but all other pairings are debatable because I haven't decided yet. But I will say that it WON'T INVOLVE SasukeXSakura. I detest that pairing so it definitely will not happen in my own fic. Other than that, the pairings are literary free-for-all.

Finally! For those Ino fans out there, I hope you all don't mind me injuring her rather heavily, do you? Good. This chapter will mainly be about Gaara Vs Sasuke, and the aftermath of that battle. Hope you all enjoy!

Chapter 9

Ino continued to jump from tree branch to tree branch. Now that Shikamaru and Haku had joined up with Sakura and Kiba, Ino had felt slightly more relieved that her ex-best friend would have at least some support. But that still didn't help her feel any less guilty for

abandoning them to face the two enemies while she escaped with the Uchiha heir. / *STOP THINKING ABOUT THAT! Think about the mission! MUST COMPLETE THE MISSION!* / Ino ranted to herself mentally, doing her best to push aside her fear and guilt from the whole situation, though it was only natural for her to be worried.

However, her thoughts were brought to an abrupt halt when the barrel she was carrying suddenly jumped for no reason what so ever. The action was so sudden that it completely startled Ino and she almost slipped off her perch. Instead, she found some place large and stable enough to put down the barrel and decided to investigate what was wrong, not knowing why the "restrained" boy would suddenly fight back without saying anything.

Straight after the barrel's bottom touched the bottom of the large branch they were currently standing on, the black 'top' of the barrel started giving off smoke, as if it was burning itself out. / *Sasuke-kun?* / Ino could only guess as to the causes of this sudden change of events, but with hope in her heart, Ino clasped her hands together in a praying motion, hoping that the last of the Uchiha clan would once again triumph over evil, save her and then return with her to save Sakura and the others, as was the norm for heroes. However, her expectations were short lived.

With a loud 'Popping' sound, the top of the barrel burst open, flinging Ino's body away due to the massive discharge of Chakra and smoke. Hitting a nearby tree and sliding down onto another branch, Ino scrambled back up to try and see if Sasuke was hurt or if he was even alive. What she saw emerge out of the barrel wasn't something she'd ever seen before, nor was it something she ever hoped to see again.

A 'creature' was wearing a black shirt bearing the Uchiha symbol on its back, but this creature had long, spiky white hair and dark brownish skin running down its arms finally ending in sharp claw-like appendages. But most frightening of all was its Chakra. Ino could literary *feel* the large fusion of unnatural Chakra thrumming out of that creature's very body. It wasn't human – Ino thought. It couldn't

be human and it couldn't be her hero. Ino cautiously lowered herself, getting into the ready position.

Before her very eyes, this creature shrank in size. Its hair simply grew shorter and shorter as if a 'reverse' button had been pressed somewhere that made the being go back into the past. And not only that, the hair changed colour too, growing darker and darker until it finally stabilised at the tone of midnight black colour. Its skin tone too, lightened dramatically until it finally settled on a light human skin-tone colour.

By now, Ino's mouth was hanging wide open, her eyes wide with silent shock, and her heart raced with undisclosed fear, for what was once a 'creature' of monster's description had changed to her childhood crush – Uchiha Sasuke.

"Sa..." Ino gulped nervously. "Sasuke-kun?" She asked in a squeaky, whimpering voice. "Is that you?"

The figure turned left slightly, gazing back at her with cold, heartless eyes – eyes that were the colour of an unnatural yellow and the whiteness of a normal human eye had completely darkened into blackness. This wasn't a human eye she was looking at, Ino realised. Not only that, there were pulsing reddish patterns on Sasuke's face, on the skin right next to his left eye.

"Ino... huh?" A low growl hissed through Sasuke's lips. "Why are you here? Where is this place?" He demanded to know, his eyes never leaving the now frozen form of Ino, still staring at him with horror in her eyes. There was no way that could be her Sasuke, there was no way this was real.

"I... I'm here to rescue you... with the others... Um... Sakura, Shikamaru, Chouji, Neji, Tenten, Hakun-sempai, and Kiba. We... we came after you when we found out you... you were kidnapped by the sound. We... we defeated them... and are now bringing you back... back to Konoha... back home." Ino managed to stutter through an explanation, hoping that Sasuke would stop looking at her with such

a deep sense of disdain and severe condescension, as if she was only an annoying fly not even worthy of being near his presence.

Sasuke's slightly insane eyes narrowed in anger at her answer. "YOU..." He growled as if accusing her of committing the worse sin in all of existence. " YOU ... are bringing me back to Konoha?" He asked in morbid fascination, as if it was the funniest thing he had ever heard and was wondering whether he should laugh or be angry.

/ This is... This is like before... during the Chuunin Exam... but much... much worse. / Ino could not find the courage to answer back so she only nodded slightly in reply, hoping that her Sasuke-kun would stop acting in such a strange fashion and return back to her beloved crush, back to that silent boy with an overpowering sense of confidence. However, her silent plea was not heard. In an instant, Ino felt an immense pain from the impact of something smashing into her right cheek, bashing her away towards the left direction of where she had originally stood. Flinging through the air in high speed, Ino abruptly smashed into the thick trunk of a nearby tree, face first and then followed by the rest of her body, before she was slowly peeled away from the smashed surface of the trunk and left to fall. Obviously delirious from pain due to the various impacts on her body and that she was still very dizzy and feeling completely uncoordinated with her body, Ino couldn't do a single thing as her body landed roughly onto a tree branch underneath her, halting her descend in a rather painful manner.

Bleeding from a split lip, her right eye was starting to swell due to the impact against the tree, her forehead was also bleeding due to having several pieces of sharp shrapnel stuck upon her forehead; Ino also knew that both her cheeks were very bruised and probably turning black and blue. As for the rest of her body, she suspected that she had at least one or two cracked rib, and plenty of scratches, bruises and abrasions. */ Shxt! What the FXXK happened! /* Ino thought to herself as her body slowly recovered from the shock of the impact and her mind started running properly again.

Once her blurry vision had cleared, she could clearly see that there was a pair of feet standing right in front of her face. She lifted her eyes upward, following the pair of feet to a person's leg, up their chest and landed on Sasuke's slightly amused face, his eyes having returned to normal and his face completely pale without any signs of having been possessed by strange markings. / *Wha...* / Before Ino could even think up anything to say, the Uchiha boy had lifted his right leg backwards slightly, preparing for some kind of kicking action. Pushing Chakra into his right foot, Sasuke mercilessly smashed his feet into Ino's chest, flinging her away once again to rebound off another tree trunk before skidding to a final stop on a rather long and large branch.

Ino coughed out a deluge of blood from her mouth, sure that several of her ribs had been broken due to that one action alone, not only that, she started gasping for breath as well, suspected that one of her cracked ribs and somehow punctured a lung. The pain was literary overwhelming. / *GOD! MAKE IT STOP!* / She mentally wailed as even breathing was becoming more and more difficult and laboured for her.

Sensing that her attacker had once again landed next to her prone form, Ino opened her eyes at her crush and have him a vicious glare, with hints of hurt, pain and betrayal visible in her eyes. "WHY!" She could only croak through her throat as she vomited blood again, trying desperately to clear the airways in order to bring in much needed air. / *Why was he hurting her? Why was he doing this?* / Her mind began to give way to darkness. / *Hadn't they saved him/*

Sasuke tilted his eyes to the side slightly. After a few moments of calm, he finally decided to answer. "Because I can." The nonchalance of his words tore a hole into Ino's heart as her once adoration of the boy before her slowly shattered into a million pieces and she was only left feeling fear, incomprehension, pain, confusion and most of all, betrayal. / *I can't stop him...* / She realised too late. / *Sakura was able to call Sasuke-kun back from the darkness within him before... but I can't do that, I don't have that type of strength... I*

can't reach him. / A stray tear dripped down the side of her face from her eyes. / Sasuke-kun. Do you even know what you're doing? Are you even Sasuke-kun anymore? Will you recognise Sakura? Naruto? Your sensei? Are you... are you ever going to return to us? Why, Sasuke-kun? WHY! / She mentally wailed.

Never in her life had she ever felt so helpless, and to a person she once idolised too. It hurt. It hurt her so much. This unimaginable pain that literary ate her heart bit by bit the longer the boy's indifferent gaze stayed on her prone form. She had never felt so used and abused before; she had never felt so cheated, deceived, so dirty and worthless in her entire life. Ino, who had always prided herself as being one of the strongest, smartest Konoichis in her year, had felt like the world had suddenly crumbled all around her leaving her with no control over anything. And she knew she was about to die, and by the hands of this traitor, by the hands that would launch a thousand pains.

/ If I'm gonna die anyway, I won't give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream or seeing me cry. / This was Ino's only thought as she forced down the rest of the tears that wanted to fall from her eyes. This was the only way she could put up a last stance against this man who she had once practically worshipped but who had betrayed her heart, her dreams and (though indirectly and unintentionally) used her feelings against her. To Ino, Sasuke's betrayal of Konoha wasn't just about him betraying his village. His current actions (hurting Ino) had proved to the girl once and for all that he didn't care about anyone or anything that has to do with Konoha at all. This includes all the people he had ever met, all the people who had ever been close to him, and, especially, all the people who cared about him.

She, and Sakura, had been two of a large majority of the villagers in Konoha who had all felt a need to look after the boy after the Uchiha Massacre. They had all done their best to cheer the boy up, to give him a home, to welcome him. They were all willing to give their all to

him, but all their attempts were returned with silence and contempt. But that didn't stop them from trying.

Sasuke hadn't just betrayed them by leaving; he was also betraying their trust, their hopes, and all their wasted efforts, all that the people of Konoha had ever tried to do for the last Uchiha heir. It really hurt. Like an uncontrollable snake, who bites its master once it has found certain freedoms, forgetting how well its master had ever treated it or looked after it. Sasuke was a snake, in Ino's eyes, a devious, black hearted snake and one that could never be trusted again.

Not caring about the savage glare directed at him, Sasuke slowly and calmly bent down, closing his hand around Ino's delicate looking neck and pulling her up slowly. The girl struggled violently against his hold, kicking him, punching him, and scratching him with her sharp nails but Sasuke ignored all that, they were futile actions anyway. When Ino grew desperate and tried to reach her kunai pouch to retrieve a weapon, Sasuke quickly seized her wrist and twisted it to an unnatural angle, completely breaking her wrist bone in a way not dissimilar to how Itachi had once broken his wrist, tearing the muscles holding her hand to her arm. Not surprisingly, Ino screamed.

Hanging limply now from Sasuke's grip on her throat, Ino fought against the darkness that was about to consume her. Her right wrist was broken, her other was still thrumming from pain due to her previous injuries, her legs were tired and she could feel several of her thigh muscles had been pulled beforehand and was now throbbing. */ I don't want to die... I don't want to die... I don't want to die... /* Ino reiterated in her mind, not able to completely squash the hope that still resides in her, unable to let go of the animal instinct of survival no matter what stands in her way. And luckily for her, it seems fate was on her side this time.

Just before Ino was rendered completely unconscious due to the lack of oxygen reaching her lung, she could feel something prickly climbing up her unmoving body, first her legs, then her chest and finally the arm that gripped her throat. With a mighty forced twist of Sasuke's hand, Ino was free of his once crushing grip and pulled

along a floating mass of brown substance that felt surprisingly like sand. Blinking the bright spots away from her vision, Ino tilted her head slightly in order to look at the person who somehow rescued her, only to find none other than Gaara of the Desert standing calmly beside her.

The silence in the air was so thick, you could really feel the tension that just simply hung there without any help from the two glaring opponents at each other, while Ino continued to gasp for breath through her bruised and sore throat and her punctured lung.

"Gaara of the Desert... What are you doing here?" Sasuke asked threateningly, eyes never leaving the motionless boy in front of him.

"Shinobis of the Sand... are now allies of the Leaf. My mission is to bring you back to Konoha." Gaara answered calmly.

"Hehehe..." Sasuke chuckled and shook his head in slight surprise. "Who would of thought that the Sand was so weak, betraying their allies - the Sound - and then cowering to the Leaf." He taunted mockingly.

"It is Orochimaru who first betrayed the trust of the Sand, just as you are betraying the home of Konoha. Tell me, can you truly trust a snake with your future?" Gaara retorted back rhetorically in his normal monotone voice, not affected at all by Sasuke's new attitude.

"Orochimaru promised me power. That is all I need to know." Sasuke confirmed strongly, totally believe in the Snake Sannin's words. Sasuke didn't care how it happened but he needed power; he needed the strength to destroy his brother.

"Power comes with a price, Uchiha Sasuke." Gaara stated almost sadly as he mentally contemplated all his years spent in utter loneliness; all the sneering eyes filled with fear and hate belonging to the villagers of the Sand, all those nightmares that still plagued him sometimes over the large number of people he had killed during his

lifetime. "Can you live with that price over your head?" He finally asked in a soft voice.

"As long as I have power, I can do anything." Sasuke was unmoving in his conviction.

"You're wrong. Great power comes with great responsibility. (1) If you do not earn or respect that power, it is worthless in your hands." Gaara concluded, never even blinking in surprise throughout the entire conversation. With that said and done, Gaara silently commanded his floating sand (which was still carrying Ino) to someplace safe and far away from here.

Ino found herself drifting farther and farther away from the two boys before finally, the floating mass of sand seemingly found a bunch of soft leaves to settle her down on, the leaves and branches belonged to a very old and very strong tree it seemed. From there, Ino found that she had to squint her eyes extremely hard to be able to see Gaara and Sasuke's form far in the distance, but at least, she was safe. */ Sasuke... Gaara... Gomen, I'm sorry I was too weak to help you... /* Her mental contemplation complete, Ino drifted into unconsciousness, finally letting her body find the rest that it needed.

The battle started almost instantaneously.

Without a word, Gaara's sand automatically poured out of the gourd strapped to his back and readied itself into attack or defence mode, while Sasuke rushed towards Gaara at high speed - the same speed he used against Gaara during the Chuunin Exam finals. Not surprisingly, Sasuke's kicks and punches were all blocked by Gaara's Suna no Tate (Shield of Sand). Without any success, Sasuke then jumped away and somersaulted backwards to land on a nearby tree. Gaara's sand immediately followed Sasuke's movements.

Upon landing perpendicular to the tree trunk, Sasuke quickly performed a few hand seals and called forth his attack - the

Goukakyuu no Jutsu (Powerful Fireball Technique). The fire that spurted out of his mouth burned continuously over the moving sand at such a high temperature, it froze the sand into glass-like sculptures. Gaara frowned at having his sand immobilised. Sasuke performed more hand seals and spurted out more flames, this time as smaller projectiles all heading towards Gaara's direction: "Katon: Hosenka no Jutsu (Fire Element: Mythical Fire Flower)".

Suddenly, large amounts of sand rushed up onto the location of their whereabouts (the tree branch they are currently standing on) from underneath the trees - called forth by Gaara all the way from the ground floor of the forest clearing that they are currently fighting on. The extra sand made it just in time to block the incoming flaming projectiles from hitting Gaara. Once the shurikens under the flames had been caught and the flames itself died, the sand shield moved away only to reveal that Sasuke was no longer where he had been standing beforehand.

Unexpectedly, the Uchiha heir suddenly reappeared behind Gaara, already preparing to strike forward, knowing that he was too fast for the Suna no Tate (Shield of sand) to catch up. His punch hit home and forced Gaara to be flung backwards slightly before his sand (the ones that were original burnt to glass that had somehow broken out of their prisons with a little added Chakra) caught him and gently placed him back onto the surface of the branch.

"Aren't you going to turn into your demon form?" Sasuke asked, curious about comparing his own strength to that of a demon.

Gaara shook his head in reply, but still stood calmly. The cracks on his face due to the black haired boy's punch having already healed since Sasuke hadn't actually hurt him due to the Suna no Yoroï (Armour of Sand) that covered every inch of Gaara's body.

"You should. Cause there's no way you can win against me without it." Sasuke mocked confidently, trying to taunt the red haired boy into using his demonic form. He wanted to face that demon, to kill him for

humiliating him before, but mostly, Sasuke wanted to test his capacity.

Gaara shook his head again in answer. "I will never summon Shukaku to fight my battles for me ever again." A slight pause ensued as Gaara thought about his next response. "Will you summon the curse seals power to do your dirty work for you?(2)" He questioned back curiously, which only infuriated his opponent, to the point where Sasuke instantly activated his Sharingan eyes to glare back.

Sasuke prepared himself by pulling out a tight curl of wire and biting one end of the wire to straighten it, ready for use; with his other hand, he reached into his weapon's pouch and procured all his necessary shurikens and kunais. Rushing forward towards Gaara again, Sasuke jumped upwards at the last second before he rammed into Gaara's Suna to Tate (Shield of Sand). Somersaulting delicately over the red haired boy, Sasuke rebounded off the giant tree trunk (that was behind Gaara) and flew forward high up into the air.

Once airborne, Sasuke let loose his collection of shurikens and kunais, all with metallic strings attached to them. The projectiles all flew past Gaara at first, confusing the boy as to their uses. They then returned in a cyclic fashion, surrounding the Sand boy, rewrapping around the tree trunk behind and finally returning towards Sasuke again. Grabbing on to them and with a pull on the various weapons and strings, Sasuke pulled hard and Gaara suddenly found himself entrapped by the wires and was pulled backwards to be encapsulated against the tree trunk behind him. Even his sand was unable to protect him from the wire net for it was unable to cut its way out of the metallic strings.

Landing delicately onto another tree branch a fair distance away, Sasuke slammed and organised all his weapons and strings in front of him, before he finally readying himself to perform one of his most powerful fire based jutsus. With his hand seals done and focused on the string still in his mouth, Sasuke called forth his technique: "Katon: Ryuuka no Jutsu! (Fire Element: Dragon Fire Technique)"

The massive amount of condensed flames rushed forth from Sasuke's mouth, following the string all the way to its target before it finally enflamed the red haired boy completely.

After a few moments of letting it burn, the flames slowly but sure died out, leaving behind the charred remains of burnt sand and glass everywhere on the tree. Sasuke frowned in frustration, knowing that Gaara had somehow escaped by using a Suna Bunshin (Sand Clone).

Hearing a suspicious sound to his right, Sasuke looked towards the direction of the sound only to find several Suna Shurikens (Sand Shurikens) heading his way. Jumping away from his location and dodging the various sand projectiles, Sasuke found himself landing on another branch not far away, only to have both his feet entrapped with sand clawing its way up his legs.

Unbeknownst to Sasuke, Gaara had already prepared himself by summoning forth a large amount of sand from the earth below, controlling them to just float in the air for the time being, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Finally, that moment arrived.

"Suna Shigure (Sand Shower) (3)" Gaara calmly called forth from above him. Sasuke looked up quickly to find a mass number of small sand particles all flying his way. Unable to move out of the way and unable to protect himself, Sasuke only had enough time to summon forth the power of the curse seal level 1, and pray that he was able to withstand whatever the sand technique was. In an instant, Sasuke found himself completely encased by Gaara's sand, which had slammed into him from all corners of the air.

Not wanting to really injure the black haired boy too much, Gaara had decided NOT to use Sabaku Kyuu or Sabaku Sousou on him since that would instantly kill the boy. However, to his surprise and annoyance, a sudden surge of unnatural Chakra from within his sand capsule – most probably the Uchiha using his new curse seal - was able to blast its way free of his sand's confinement. Sasuke - whose body is now completely covered by intricate black marks - stood

proudly as if mocking Gaara's failed attempt at capturing the boy and keeping him as is.

"My orders were to capture you, Uchiha Sasuke, and bring you back to Konoha, no matter what it takes." Gaara explained. "I do not wish to hurt you during the process. However, if it comes down to it, I will use what ever method is available to me to complete my mission." He continued in his explanation firmly, sounding off a final warning to the Uchiha.

Sasuke only laughed at him in return, completely amused by Gaara's confidence. "Just because you tricked me once doesn't mean it'll happen again. I don't fall for the same thing twice, Gaara of the Desert." The black haired boy sneered back at his opponent hatefully. "It's about time I prove myself against you anyway. I've been meaning to fight against you and against Naruto for a long time coming now. It's time for me to grow up and defeat the two of you so that I can finally pursue my dream."

Gaara only shook his head in slight pity. "At your current level of development, you will never catch up to Uzumaki Naruto." He stated calmly and defiantly.

Sasuke growled back in anger. "AND WHY NOT? Huh? What does it he has that I don't! I have more potential than he ever will! I'm the last of the UCHIHA – an elite clan of Konoha, while **HE** ... His name isn't even in their record books! I have more power, more hate, more pain and am far more **special** than he could ever be!" The Uchiha heir roared in self-righteous anger. He had witnessed the death of his parents before his very eyes. He had been the only survivor of the massacre of his clan. While Naruto... While Naruto had none of those; he had none of his pain!

"And that is why you will lose. It isn't about anger, hatred or power anymore, Uchiha. It's about your identity and how you define yourself." Gaara replied nonchalantly. "Do you truly believe that you are the only one who is 'special'?" Gaara taunted back.

"Heh. I know I am MORE special than he will ever be. That's why Orochimaru pursued ME, instead of him. You were the one who told me I was weak, that I was too soft, that I didn't have enough hate. It was **you** who told me: 'The power of hate is the power to kill... and the power to kill is the power of vengeance. If you don't have as much hate as me, then that means that you are weaker than me. (4)' Those were your exact words." Sasuke snarled back in anger. "Now that someone is finally recognising my potential, Konoha sends YOU to come after ME ? Are you afraid of losing to me, Sabaku no Gaara (Gaara of the Desert)? Are you taking back your own words?" He scorned.

"Yes. I am... I was wrong and I admit it." Gaara's calm declaration stunned Sasuke slightly. "Even then (during our last fight), I was unable to defeat Uzumaki Naruto. My hate, my pain... far surpasses your own and that which belongs to Uzumaki Naruto. However, there is a difference between the three of us that distinguishes our strength and weaknesses. At the time, I used hatred to guide my power. You were desperate and that emotion guided your actions. As for Uzumaki Naruto, he had faith... and hope. That is why I lost to him." Gaara explained.

"I am the youngest son of the previous Kazekage, and yet I am treated worse than trash in my home village. Uzumaki Naruto is the nephew and heir to the Lady Oracle, mistress of the Hidden Air village. And even HE wasn't treated with any more respect than common thugs while he lived in Konoha. We both have our own flaws and our own weaknesses; we both wish to be stronger. However, that does not mean we can simply abandon and betray all those who had ever cared for us. I admit, I used to be a heartless killer, but even then, I was never completely willing to hurt my closest confidants – my own sister and brother. What makes you so special, Uchiha? Don't talk about 'potential' when you have no idea what it actually *is* ! Who gave you the right to be this arrogant and this selfish about your own 'potential'? How dare you presume yourself to be so important compared to those around you!" With each word that

left Gaara's lips, his tone became more grave and more pronounced, practically accusing Sasuke at the end of his rant.

Having been left slightly unbalanced by Gaara's angry proclamation, the boy had never talked that much after all, Sasuke was a little bit confused about all the new information he had been given. / *Naruto... is the heir to the ruling family of the Kuunoki (Air)! I... didn't know that... Why... Why didn't he tell me? And what the hell does that all mean, anyway! What does he mean treated like trash? What the hell does that have to do with ME! / His internal anger and hatred pushed away all thoughts that bordered on his teammate, and moved all his focus upon himself once again. / This is all useless news to me. I'm not Naruto and I never will be. I have my own destiny to follow and that is to kill Itachi. That is my ambition, it is my dream, and it is what I live for. No matter what the cost – even if I have to sell my soul to the devil itself – I will gain the power to kill my brother. I don't care what I have to do, who I have to hurt... but I MUST BECOME STRONGER! STRONG ENOUGH TO KILL THAT MAN! / Sasuke finally confirmed to himself.*

Ignoring Gaara's jibe at his personal worth, Sasuke launched himself towards Gaara again. While running at high speed towards Gaara and avoiding the pursuit of the sand surrounding the boy, Sasuke quickly performed a few set of hand seals, readying himself for his next attack. "Raikan Mahi no Jutsu! (Lightning Shock Paralysis)" Sasuke called forth as he struck several of the sand entities chasing after him, discharging his own electrified Chakra into the mix and obstructing Gaara's own control over the sand particles.

With the sand barriers currently rendered useless, Sasuke charged towards Gaara. Sidestepping the destabilised sand, Sasuke struck Gaara with a series of punches and kicks that was of such speed that the red haired boy found no way to dodge or avoid. Barrage after barrage of hits, strikes, punches and knocks – all still currently enhanced by Sasuke's Raikan Mahi no Jutsu (Lightning Shock Paralysis) continued to slam against Gaara's sand armoured clad body.

Slowly but surely, Gaara knew he was losing this fight. He could feel his body spasm slightly due to the electrical surge that had coursed through his veins almost constantly now – disabling his ability to control his sand. Whilst the sand on his skin did not conduct electricity, and had played a vital role at lessening the power of the attack, but still, some of the electrical currents managed to make it to his skin and from there, to the rest of his body.

After a few minutes of the same Taijutsu assaults from Sasuke, Gaara's Suna no Yoroi (Armour of Sand) seems to be cracking and breaking apart piece by piece. Sasuke silently crowed with victory as he gave Gaara a roundhouse kick in the face before flipping backwards several metres and preparing for his most powerful jutsu – the Chidori (Thousand Birds) - to try and finish Gaara off.

Within a few moments of preparation, the high-pitched ringing noise of the famous Chidori rung throughout the clearing of their battle ground. By that time, Gaara had recovered efficiently enough from his previous paralysis and was standing stock still, readying his own defences for what's to come. Without any warning or even a call to charge, Sasuke rushed forward with his Chakra infused hand at rapid speed.

Gaara lifted both his hands towards Sasuke's direction and snapped one shut into a tightly fist before releasing it and snapping the other into a fist. What this did was that the sand (that had already covered the entire tree branch they were fighting on) followed Gaara's tight control and tried to snap at the charging Sasuke, attempting to stop him in his tracks. (5) However, even when successful in blocking the angered Uchiha, all Sasuke had to do was raise his Chidori and the jutsu itself was able to smash a hole large enough for him to go through. Increasing his speed and agility, Sasuke suddenly disappeared from Gaara's sight, shocking the Red haired boy and rendering him slightly nervous. A millisecond later, Sasuke reappeared again, this time, right in front of Gaara's face.

Sasuke then continued by slamming his Chidori charged hand right into Gaara's sand covered chest. With much force and power,

Sasuke sustained a constant push in his arm, shoving right through the red haired boy's chest, thrusting his way through to the other side. Seeing that he had finally come out the victor, Sasuke disengaged his charging Chidori but left his arm there, impaling the body of Gaara. However, his small sense of victory soon died out as the Gaara that was pinned by his arm slowly melted into a pile of sand, leaving Sasuke more frustrated than ever before having wasted a perfectly good Chidori on a Sand Clone (Suna Bunshin no Jutsu) dressed up to look like Gaara while the other boy escaped unscathed.

Suddenly, in his moment of distraction, a large mass of sand smashed into the Uchiha's side, flinging him sideways and banging himself against a nearby tree. Leaving Sasuke with no time to react, Gaara continued to slam large amounts of compact sand onto Sasuke's being, ensnaring and entrapping him against the tree (6). Once the sand had a stabilised form, Gaara immediately tightened it more, giving Sasuke absolutely no chance of escaping. With the increase tightening of the sand particles, Sasuke felt as if his lungs were really being crushed to death, and he could do no more but gasp in breathlessness.

Opening his pain filled eyes, Sasuke glared at Sabaku no Gaara with all the hate, anger and frustration that welled within his single body. / *I won't lose! I refuse to lose! I lost the last time we fought and needed bloody Naruto to rescue me! I won't make the same mistake again! **I WON'T LOSE! I CAN'T LOSE! I'D RATHER DIE THAN LOSE AGAIN!*** Sasuke roared mentally in his mind, and as such, triggered the release of the curse seal level 2.

With the second level of the curse seal activated, Sasuke's entire body changed. The first thing to change was his hair, the once short ebony locks elongated into a coat of long, snow-white mane. The tresses framed his once pale and delicate face, spiked wildly upon the top of his head and continued down his back until the back of his shoulder blades. The next thing that changed was his skin tone. The black patterns that scattered across his body and face from the

activation of the curse seal level 1 increased in numbers and slowly merged into one whole, blackish-brown skin tone which covered his entire body, leaving a strange black star-cross in between his eyes and nose. Sasuke's lips blacked to ebony jade, while his eyes too – the white area surrounding his red Sharingan eyes also darkened to black. His nails grew almost an inch in length, creating animalistic claw-like weapons on his body.

Thinking that the demonic metamorphoses had finally ended, Gaara decided it was time he stopped playing nice. He lifted his right hand in front of him (at the direction of the changed Sasuke) and slowly closed it to a fist. "Sabaku Kyuu. (Desert Coffin)" Gaara stated monotonously. The sand, as if in reply, compressed against Sasuke's demonic form, crushing the boy slowly and steadily.

However, Sasuke wasn't about to give up either. Gritting his teeth tightly in preparation of the ensuing pain, Sasuke shifted his shoulders slightly, and as if by command, two large, demonic wings suddenly burst out of his shoulder blades and spread out its complete wingspan of twice his original height. With the sudden emergence of his wings and an upsurge of Chakra, Sasuke was able to blast all the sand that encapsulated him away, leaving him free and able to move. Unlike Naruto with his Tenkū no Buki (Weapons of Heavenly Warriors) – the Kakuhou no Hane (Black Phoenix Feather), Sasuke's wings had no feathers. It was scale-like and reptilian in shape and style – similar to that of medieval Dragon's wings. The wings had leather skin with bones sticking out of the membrane upon certain areas acting as bones to hold the entire assemble together. Overall, Sasuke really started to look like a demon himself.

Now in his curse seal level 2 form, Sasuke flapped his mutated wings a few time and lifted himself off the branch he was standing on. Thrusting his wings hard, Sasuke found himself floating quiet a distance up above the ground, glaring at Gaara.

Gaara frowned in return, partly in irritation and partly in shock, as the battle scape changed once again, this time to the air. He used his

Chakra to gather the sand particles underneath his feet and slowly rise off the ground underneath him as well. Steadily, Gaara, standing upon his mass of swirling sand, floated to the same height as Sasuke, ready and waiting for the next assault.

"Heh. You were special, I'll give you that, Sabaku no Gaara (Gaara of the Desert). However, it's time I prove that I'm **more** special than you, once and for all. " Sasuke released an animalistic growl in conjunction with his speech. Gaara didn't even reply to the comment, still standing comfortably on his floating mass of sand, emotionless and indifferent.

Concentrating and performing a set of three hand seals, Sasuke instantly summoned forth his specially enhanced Chidori. But, unlike his regular Chidori, this one was filled with dark, purplish Chakra, not to mention there was at least 10 times more Chakra in this one than the regulars. The 'chi chi chi' sound that usually emits from a regular Chidori is multiplied by a hundred fold, creating a chaotic symphony of charged, sparkly Chakra and high pitch noise. Sasuke flapped his wings once in order to propel himself forward, towards Gaara's position for the boy's eminent death by his hand.

Gaara, seeing that his captive had decided to gamble on this one final shot of freedom, decided that he should also pull out the big guns and end the fight once and for all. Firstly, he called back all his original sand (the one that he usually carries around inside the giant gourd) and surrounded himself, creating a giant sand sphere of highly compact sand, another layer to his absolute defence. Second, he created a third eye (made up of sand) and positioned it right outside his sand sphere, so that he could still see what's happening in the outside world while he prepares his final defence.

For his third and final move, Gaara used extra Chakra to call forth more sand from the earth – this time, he wanted specific minerals that had the maximum density quality, able to withstand high amounts of stress and strain. With this special sand mineral, Gaara forced his supreme absolute defence – The Saikou Zettai Bougyo Shukaku no tate! (Supreme Absolute Defence, Shield of Shukaku).

Indeed, the strange looking panda-like or badger-like statue, completely made out of sand, looked rather strange and bulky. With its blackish tattoo on its chest and arms, as well as the round farmer's hat atop its head, the Shukaku no tate did not look that strong at all.

Mentally laughing at the odd looking floating sand statue, Sasuke thought to himself that he should just destroy it first before he charged at Gaara himself. "What the hell is that sand toy for, Gaara? You actually think something as ridiculous looking as that will be able to stop me, dream on? I was able to break through your sand sphere with my regular Chidori once, don't think I can't this time with an enhanced Chidori! This will be the end, Sabaku no Gaara!" Sasuke yelled as he continued to charge towards the weird sand sculpture, slamming his Chidori charged hand right into the centre of it, smashing his way through into the statue's core. And it is there, that Sasuke found out that he was facing a resistance much harder than he had ever anticipated.

Massive amounts of sand particles all spewed out due to the force of the impact caused by Sasuke's Chidori charged arm thrusting into the sand sculpture. The various sand particles swirled slightly in the air, floated for a few seconds before falling to the trees underneath once it had lost the Chakra that had once bound it to Gaara.

/ Im... Impossible! / Sasuke thought to himself as he continued to charge his Chidori (wasting a lot of Chakra at the same time) and forcing his arm through the high-density compact sand. */ I feel as if my hand is the one being crushed here! /* Sasuke couldn't help but flinch slightly at the intense pain that was running up his arm, wondering how long it would last before his bone's finally broke. */ I won't... I can't lose here! I can't! /* Trying desperately to convince himself that he still had a chance to win, Sasuke (neglecting his own common sense) summoned up more effort into trying to force his way through the sand barrier.

However, to Sasuke's utter shame and disappointed, he suddenly felt his entire body seizing in pain due to the Curse Seal Level 2

form. / Shxt! I forgot I'm not suppose to stay in this form too long because it corrupts and corrodes my body at an incredibly fast rate. At this rate, I'm gonna die of my own transformation before I can deal with Gaara. I can't... SHXT! I can't hold this form any longer, I'm still not use to it yet and I'm running dangerously low on Chakra! / Sasuke mentally cursed as he knew he had reached his limit.

Slowly but sure, his skin returned to its normal hue as the black markings which once covered his entire body receded into its neutral form – the three dotted tattoo on the back of his neck. The leathery, scale-filled wings attached to the boy's shoulders quickly twisted in an unnatural fashion (as it was breaking its own bones) and plunged back into the boy's rugged back and shoulder blades, leaving no sign that they had once unfurled into such monstrous creations. While the markings were receding, so too was Sasuke's unnatural long, white, hair returning to its normal ebony colour and returning to its normal length. Sasuke's claws and fangs disappeared, as too did the strange black cross-scar between his eyes and nose. Soon enough, he had reversed back to the normal looking Uchiha Sasuke that everybody knew about.

In his weakened form and without the added bonus of Chakra from the curse seal, Sasuke was unable to contain the Chidori and so, it quickly died out as well, leaving the boy literary hanging in the air (without his wings to support him) with his arms stuck inside this giant floating statue of sand. Sasuke, unable to continue to focus anymore due to massive Chakra depletion, was soon lulled into unconsciousness, leaving him to the tender mercies of Gaara.

Gaara, upon seeing Sasuke's state from the third eye he had created earlier, released the sand sphere that had protected him just in case as well as the third eye technique, leaving him just standing on his own floating mass of sand and his outlandish statue. Slowly but surely, Gaara and his various sand creations brought the unconscious boy back down to earth. There, Gaara disbanded his Sukaku no tate (Shield of Shukaku) and returned the sand back deep within the earth's crust. Using his own sand, Gaara picked up

the unconscious forms of Uchiha Sasuke and Yamanaka Ino before finally heading towards the direction of Konoha.

"Orochimaru-sama... It seems as if Sasuke-sama... is no longer coming." Kabuto sifted slightly in nervousness. "All four of the Sound Four guards are also missing. There were signs of battle everywhere along the way between the Sound border and the Fire country... but... there's no trace as to what happened to them afterwards. My suspicion is that whatever group the Leaf had sent after Sasuke-sama, seemed to be strong enough to not only defeat the Sound four, but was able to bring them back to Konoha for interrogation. May I suggest that we strike first before they are able to gather much information about our forces?" Kabuto wisely advised, thinking that this was their only option at this critical moment in time.

The white haired man had never felt so unprepared for anything before in his entire life (excluding his home village's massacre and his mother's execution). It was his decision to send the Sound Four after the Uchiha heir after all. And for the mission to turn out so bad... he was certainly feeling nervous about his master's punishment for such a massive failure.

"What has our spy in Konoha to say?" Orochimaru redirected the focus away from their imminent attack, as even he wasn't sure of their success rate if they start their attack at such a crucial time of unpredictability.

Kabuto paused for a moment before he answered the question. "Our spy, Mizuki, said that the Leaf only sent bunch of Genins and Chuunin-potentials after the Uchiha heir. In the end, it was the Sand Siblings who returned with all of them sometime yesterday afternoon. The Sand Siblings told the newly appointed Godaime Hokage – Tsunade-sama - that they were given the rescue mission under the orders of the Lady Oracle and the Shadow Master – Kaga. After their return, Sasuke-sama was immediately moved into the central building's confinement section where he is currently being 'interrogated'." He explained.

After a long period of silence, Orochimaru's curiosity finally overcame him. "Who were the ones sent after Sasuke?"

"Nara Shikamaru, Haruno Sakura, Yamanaka Ino, Akimichi Chouji, Hyuuga Neji, Tenten, Inuzuka Kiba and the Medic Nin – Haku." Kabuto answered succinctly, though he knew that he would pay for his answers later on.

"You're telling that a bunch of genins, and ONE medic Nin, was able to thwart my entire plan of taking Sasuke-kun? Not only that, but ALL the genins were ROOKIE genins?" Orochimaru whispered in a threatening manner.

"Yes, sir." Kabuto could do nothing else but mumble the answer out.

"And now, we don't even know where Jiroubou, Kidoumaru, Tayuya, Sakon and Ukon are, let alone our failed attempt to take Sasuke?" Orochimaru continued to sneer the hateful questions out of his mouth, rage already boiling underneath the surface.

"Yes, sir." Kabuto answered, flinching slightly at the unabashed rage in his master's eyes.

Breathing in deeply and releasing his breath, Orochimaru forcefully calmed himself down in order to continue his questions. "Tell me, did our spy report seeing the Sound Four at all?"

Kabuto paused for a minute to remember what had actually been written on the message sent by their spy. "No, sir. In his message, he stated that none of the Sound Four had been part of the entourage that returned to the Leaf yesterday afternoon." He finally answered.

"If that's so, then how can you assume that the Sound four are in the hands of the Leaf interrogators?" Orochimaru asked rhetorically.

After a slight pause, Kabuto suggested: "Perhaps they were brought in by another group instead?"

"Don't assume things, Kabuto. Find out the facts!" Orochimaru ordered. "Do you really think that those Leaf Genins would have the capacity to actually capture any of the Sound Four? No. I'm telling you that the Leaf brats had nothing to do with the Sound Four's disappearance. The Sand siblings, maybe, but even they have no motive to do such troublesome things. No. All of this stinks of the Lady Oracle's involvement. After all, **she** was the one who sent the Sand in the first place." Orochimaru theorised, and Kabuto could only nod in agreement, having already angered his master, he was not going to do anymore to jeopardise his own safety.

Shaking his head to clear it, Orochimaru refocused his energy on another matter. "How are the preparations for the war going?"

"The alliance with the Hidden Rain have worked out quiet well, not only that, but they also have a trump card up their sleeve. Remember the special weapon that belonged to the Nidaime Hokage – the Raijin, which was somehow lost several years back? Well, it had somehow fallen into the hands of a Rain Nin by the name of Rokusho Aoi. And so, that will certainly prove useful; not to mention, the plan of the final attack are currently being drafted as well. As for the Nukenins (Missing Nins) from the Hidden Grass and the Hidden Stone village, they have already been assigned a Shinobi rank within our army and each group is ready to perform their own tasks as long as they get paid. The ex-Kuunoki Ninjas however, are the most interesting." Kabuto listed out the various updates on their plans.

"By your suggestion, they've treated Kimimaro-kun's mysterious illness to the best of their ability, and it has worked for a bit. It seems that Kimimaro-kun's special bloodline ability and body structure is being corroded by the Curse Seal Level 2 at too fast a pace and they have found some way to slow that process down. Not only that, they have somehow managed to regrow and replace a few of his organs and special glands that help his body function. This all means that Kimimaro-kun's life expectancy has increased dramatically from just a few weeks (as I have predicted) to several years at least. But

eventually, his illness will catch up to him and then he will die. The ex-Kuunoki Shinobis haven't exactly been sharing any of their techniques with our soldiers but they have been doing extensive research in our labs on how to improve our weaponry technology, our Chakra capacity and control as well as our various human experimentations." Kabuto concluded all his findings while Orochimaru remained silent, quietly contemplating everything that has been said so far.

After a moment of silence, Kabuto decided to quell his curiosity. "Are you going to be using Kimimaro-kun's body again, Orochimaru-sama? I mean, it would be best if you had the use of your hands to perform Jutsus during the war, and as such, if you took a new body now, it would be to our advantage." Kabuto asked.

"No." Orochimaru answered succinctly. "I want the Sharingan ability and the Uzumaki ability, but I am not patient enough to wait another 3 years so that they can become stronger and harder to capture just because I took another host body. No, I will wait for the opportune time to strike and nab both of them at the same time." Orochimaru gave a sadistic smirk and started chuckling.

"Having the Kuunoki scientists working for me is my ultimate asset. I will use it wisely. Order some of the scientist to research on this DAMNED death's seal on my arm and order the rest of them to mainly concentrate of our human clone hybrid project. I want them to help me create the perfect host, one with both the ability of the Uchiha and the Uzumaki. Then and only then, will I be satisfied." Orochimaru's chuckle quickly grew into a maniacal laugh that rung through the empty hallways.

Back in Konoha, the Sand Siblings were just preparing to leave and they had a small group of newly established friends seeing them off.

"Gaara-san. Thank you for saving my life." Ino blushed slightly at having to personally 'thank' the most powerful and arguably the scariest member of the Sand team. Though she was still 'recovering'

from her injuries, most of her more severe wounds (broken bones, punctured lung) had already been dealt with the moment she returned to Konoha by the newly appointed Hokage. It was a surprise to all of them (except Sakura and Shikamaru) that they do have a new Hokage, and it just turned out to be the last of the Legendary Sannin – Tsunade. "If it hadn't been for your timely rescue, I might have died by that traitorous bastard's hand." Ino sneered the last three words out hatefully, and behind her Sakura winced at the obvious hate in her tone of voice.

"Yeah. Thank you very much, Temari-san. For defeating the Sound Nin, Tayuya, and helping to take me back to Konoha." Sakura gave the Sand Genin a formal bow to demonstrate her sincerity. Sakura had completely recovered from her injuries from her own fight against Tayuya. Unlike her friend, Ino, who had immediately started hating their once crush – Sasuke-kun; She, herself, had felt betrayed and disappointed when she had learnt that he willingly left Konoha. However, he was still her teammate, and even though her feelings for him had changed (she was sure), he was still important to her. You don't just spend months and months training and practically living with someone without learning to care for them. She may not love him anymore (she finally admitted to herself), but he was precious to her, almost like a brother, and she was infinitely glad that he's home and safe.

Gaara only nodded in silence while Temari gave the pink haired girl thumbs-up sign for good luck. She then turned her attention to Shikamaru, her personal rival. "Well, looks like this is it, then. Next time, don't rely on a **girl** to save your ass, cry baby." She taunted the black haired boy, referring to his crying in relief as he was told his best friend was okay and recovering well in the Hospital, all thanks to the Godaime Hokage.

Shikamaru winced slightly before returning to smile neutrally at the girl. "I'll try to keep that in mind, Temari-san." He answered firmly. After their return from their mission, Shikamaru had immediately set out towards the Hospital with the unconscious Sakura on his back.

He needed to make sure that Chouji was back and safe. After a while, he had met up with Shizune, the new coordinator of Medic Nin Trainees to learn that both Chouji and Neji had arrived safely with Kaga-san's help, and both are recovering well from their injuries. However, it will still be a few more weeks before they are let out of the hospital.

It was then that Tenten stepped forward (towards Temari) and held out her right hand in the posture of shaking hands. "Truce?"

Temari smiled, grabbed Tenten's hand firmly and shook it. "Truce."

They let go and Tenten stepped back but without needed to have the final word against *her* self-declared rival. "The next time we meet, I **WILL** be stronger, so just you wait."

Temari gave a short chuckle in reply. "I'll be waiting for that."

After that, it was Kiba's turn to say his own goodbyes. "Oi! Make-up breath! The next time I see you, I'm gonna kick your ass for saying all that stuff about us Leaf nins being weak!" He taunted good-naturedly. Though he wasn't as badly hurt as Chouji (with his pills) and Neji (with the punctured wound), but Kiba had been released from the hospital on the condition that he DOES ABSOLUTELY NO TRAINING for a few weeks, so that his stomach muscles can heal without any stress or strain being put on them. Akamaru, on the other hand, didn't come off as Scot-free. The poor dog had suffered a direct stab wound into one of its eye, and though the wound had been stitched up, the dog may never really recover its vision in that particular eye, which caused much anguish in Kiba, but he pushed all those pain and doubts down deep into his heart as he continued to bid his new friends goodbye.

Kankuro snorted in reply. "It's the truth. You ARE weak!" The black clad Sand Genin smirked out superiorly.

"WHY YOU!" The dog boy tried to launch himself at the smirking Shinobi only to be pulled back by Haku.

The older boy smiled nicely to all three of the Sand Shinobis, ignoring the shouts and protests of the boy he was currently withholding. "See you guys and thank you all very much for helping us! Be careful going home, okay!" He bid cheerfully.

Last but not least, it was finally Naruto to say his own goodbyes. "Arigato, Gaara, Temari and Kankuro. For bringing my friends back in one piece. I could never thank you all enough." Naruto also gave them a short bow in gratitude.

But instead of waving it off with nonchalance, all three of the sand Siblings returned the gesture with a bow of their own. "You are welcomed, Uzumaki-san." They formally addressed him with special honorific.

"Please. Just 'Naruto' will do." Naruto shifted uncomfortably after being so formally addressed. "When you say 'Uzumaki-san', it feels as if you're referring to my Aunt instead of me."

"As you wish, Naruto-san." Temari gave him a quirky smile when Naruto grimaced at the 'san' part.

"It is the least we could do. After all, the Lady Oracle did help us a lot. Not only did she give Gaara that seal, which cut off all the influences that Shukaku once had over Gaara. But she also came back with us to the Sand Village, and helped us establish a new government system, with new members; creating a stable power structure and help our village get rid of its many spies and corrupted officers. It's amazing all the things that she had done for us. And when she asked a single favour from us, we gladly agreed, the favour being that she wanted us to help you guys capture and bring the Uchiha back to Konoha. So, that's what we did." Kankuro explained, obviously awed and feeling a great depth of gratitude towards the Lady Oracle.

Naruto could only shrug in response. After all, his Aunt was the type of person who saw a problem and couldn't help but try to fix it, even though it was none of her business. However, she was also a master

manipulator and loved to make other people do all the dirty work for her, while in the end, everything turned out the way she wanted them to in the first place. "But still, I'm glad for all your help."

Unexpectedly, Gaara took a few steps forward towards Naruto and handed the blonde boy a small scroll. "The Lady Oracle told me to give you this the moment I am to leave Konoha. She said that inside is a new Jutsu she wants you to learn on your own." Gaara stated indifferently.

Naruto nodded in appreciated, taking hold of the scroll and putting it into one of his jacket's many pockets. "Thank you once again, Gaara."

Gaara shook his head in denial. "It is I that should thank you, Uzumaki Naruto."

Naruto gave him a soft smile and patted Gaara on the shoulder in sign of welcome. "You and I... we share a similar destiny, a similar pain. Remember this, Gaara - you are never alone. Wherever you are, whatever you do, you have my support and my faith."

Gaara smiled back gently in reply. After a short moment of silence, all three Sand siblings turned their back towards their new allies and friends and then set off towards their own home, the Sand village.

(End)

(1) A lovely direct quote from our favourite wall-climbing hero – Spiderman.

(2) For those who are wondering how Gaara knew about Sasuke's curse seal, this is because 1) He was there during the failed takeover of Konoha when he fought Sasuke and Sasuke eventually lost due to the emergence of the curse seal, 2) He was told by the Lady oracle to expect it before she ordered him to rescue the boy.

(3) Translation taken from Aone version of the episode 126. Inane called it 'Desert Rain', but I didn't think that was exactly correct.

(4) When demonic Gaara fought against Sasuke during the Sound Invasion, just before Naruto came to the rescue. I didn't really write this part in my story so there isn't any flashback scene but you all know what I mean.

(5) I'm trying to describe the part during episode 126, where Gaara used both his hand to try and capture/block/stop Kimimaro (in his curse seal level 2 form) from charging towards him and Lee's location.

(6) Think of how Sakura was slammed and trapped against a tree by Gaara's sand in the Cannon series. Here, Gaara's doing the same thing only towards Sasuke this time.

I hope the ending wasn't too long and boring for you guys. I wanted somewhere where I can explain what happened to all the characters (Neji, Chouji, Kiba, Akamaru, etc.) without having to split the scenes up individually. And I also wanted to add another bit in there about an upcoming conversation between Naruto and Sasuke, but it seems that I don't have any space left, so I'll leave that to the next chapter. By the way, I've started a new job this week so it might be a while before I have the time and inspiration to write up the next chapter. However, know that I never give up and I WILL EVENTUALLY finish this story. I hate it when great stories are left to hand and am determined to at least finish this one no matter how long it takes. Arigato for all your support.

That's all I really wanted to say, hope you all enjoy this chapter and please review. Tell me what you liked about it, what you don't like about it, any ideas that you think it could be improved upon, etc. etc.

On a final note, I'd just like to tell all of you (my fans, my readers) who are interested in the upcoming Chuunin Exam Original Characters, all their Character Biographies (including a Nin Information Card for each character) are up on my website. I have

also finished my character biography page for the 10 Gate Guardians of the Air Village, which will be turning up very soon. Go to my profile's page to get the link.

Healing

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Ten: Healing

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: Pg-13 or T (I'm still not very use to the new ratings).

Chapter 10

Naruto sighed again as he looked up at the person sitting behind the Hokage's desk, which (in itself) was currently piled up high with reports and other papers that the Hokage herself was suppose to be reading over.

"Let me get this straight. **YOU** want to see the Uchiha... by yourself, without any protection... and you don't want either myself or Jiraiya to be present in the room with you, right?" The Hokage's pause in speech was met with a nod from Naruto. "Why the secrecy, Naruto?" Tsunade finally asked, sitting back onto her comfortable chair, while contemplating about the boy before her.

Naruto sighed again. "I... I just need it. I want to try something on Sasuke... to prove that what he did was wrong... to educate him, I guess... and I don't want people to know what happened between

us. Sort of like a counsellor of sorts." The blond boy answered with a shrug of indifference.

Tsunade narrowed her eyes at his explanation. "What exactly ARE you trying to do with him, Naruto?"

Naruto gave her a soft smirk. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret, would it?"

A long pause ensued between the two as Tsunade thought over the boy's request, before finally making a decision and slumped her tense shoulders in forced relaxation. "Fine. Do what you like, Naruto. I trust your judgement." She said tiredly.

Naruto's smirk turned into a sincere smile, before he bowed to her in gratitude. He then turned around to leave the room but was stopped by her final comment. "But if that boy lays a single finger on you, he's gonna hear from ME! You understand!" The Godaime Hokage yelled from behind. Naruto continued to smile, even after he had closed the door behind him, leaving the stressed Hokage to her pile of work.

/ Old hag with a protective streak a mile high... / Naruto thought amusedly.

Naruto stepped in to the sterile room with a single light hanging from the ceiling and no visible windows in the tiled room. He sighed as he looked over the dejected form of his ex-teammate lying motionlessly on a mattress, the only piece of furniture in the entire room. Gently but firmly Naruto closed the door behind him, knowing that the four Anbu guards would tolerate nothing less and would easily jump him if he presented any suspicion on releasing the last of the Uchiha from their custody.

A long moment of silence lasted between the two before Sasuke's curiosity finally overcame him. "Why are you here, Naruto?" He asked the other boy, never moving a single inch from his laid back position.

Naruto shrugged at first, but once he noticed that his companion couldn't see the action, as the black haired boy had an arm over his eyes, Naruto decided to verbally reply. "I'm just here to ask you to repent." He explained nonchalantly.

Sasuke chuckled mirthlessly. "Repent? There's nothing to repent? I'm not sorry I left. In fact, given the chance, I'd do it again." He snorted determinately.

Naruto sighed again. "And what do you think the outcome would be if you left Konoha, Sasuke?" He asked tiredly.

"I would gain power. The power I seek to avenge my clan. Konoha is weak. Orochimaru will give me the power I need." Sasuke replied arrogantly.

Naruto shook his head in dismay. "Sasuke... you forget that Orochimaru, himself is originally from Konoha. Orochimaru studied under the third Hokage, he lived most of his life under Konoha, just as all the Legendary Sannin. Don't you see? It isn't Orochimaru that fosters strength; he just uses it. It is Konoha itself that fosters strength among its inhabitants." He explained patiently.

At this, Sasuke finally moved. He shifted quickly into a sitting position and glared at Naruto with all his worth. "Orochimaru recognised that Konoha has nothing more to give, no more strength to grow. The Leaf has become stagnant! The Leaf is WEAK! That's why Orochimaru LEFT, **FOR POWER** !" He defended passionately, almost on the verge of hitting the blonde.

"And *power* justifies everything?" Naruto asked the boy rhetorically, interested in his answer.

"Power is the only thing that cannot be ignored." Sasuke answered vehemently. "Justice, right and wrong, ethics, rules of engagement... these are nothing but man-made ideals that are subjected to the opinion of the strong. Only the strong can be right, the weak are pushed aside. This world does not exist in black or white, it is all a

shade of grey, and only the powerful can say where the line is drawn between the two!" He sprouted out his own philosophy and ideas on society.

Naruto only nodded in agreement. "True." A slight pause ensued. "But we are all humans none the less, and as such, we willingly subject ourselves to these rules. We accept them... because they make us feel special, feel protected and secured; they make us feel that we are more important than animals. Remember Sasuke, you cannot deny your humanity, no matter how much you try." Naruto looked over the other boy with such a sad and pitiful gaze upon his face. He wanted to help him, he truly did, but if Sasuke couldn't help himself then there was nothing Naruto could do.

Sasuke continued to glare fiercely at Naruto. "Even if I must become a monster, even if I must sell my soul to the devil itself, I will find a way to attain power and kill my brother. I don't care about feeling special, I don't care if I become an animal because I will kill my brother and that is enough for me!" He finally growled out through gritted teeth.

Naruto's pity filled eyes did not change. "Revenge isn't everything."

"To me, **IT IS** !" Sasuke confirmed.

Naruto's relaxed shoulders slumped in helplessness, his gaze shifted away from the vengeance filled boy before him. / *Such pain filled eyes... so much anger, so much hate... just begging someone to save him... was I... did I ever look like that, Aunt Ruri? When we first met, did I... did I really look that lost?* / Naruto wondered.

(FLASHBACK)

Ten-year-old Naruto sat quietly on the floor in front of his Aunt's office. The room was immaculately neat, with pristine white walls, glistening tiled floors that practically reflect anything that is placed on top of it like a mirror, and perfectly dust-free furnitures. It was so perfect that it looked unliveable. It was too clean, simply put; there

was no life in anything. Even the table that his Aunt was working on – which was supposedly the messiest part in the entire room, was also flawlessly neat to a fault. Everything had its own placement and no one dared to move it, unless they wanted to feel her wrath of course. It was a doll's house, a display room, see-but-don't-touch; and most of all - Naruto **hated** it with a passion. He hated the perfection, the cleanliness but most of all he hated being there, being in such a perfect world where he knew nothing was even close to perfect.

Shifting slightly again in boredom and agitation at waiting for his Aunt, young Naruto decided to speak up. "Ne... Lady-sama. Why did you call me in here and then have me wait?" No answer was forthcoming. After a few minutes of patiently waiting, Naruto decided to try again. "Ne... Lady-sama? Did you hear me?"

This time at least, his Aunt deigned to answer. "What do **you** think, Naruto-kun? Why **are** you here?"

After a few moments' thought, Naruto shook his head in confusion. "I dunno, Lady-sama." Naruto lowered his body into a crouching position, afraid that he had upset his Aunt somehow. But no punishment was forthcoming.

"Tell me." His Aunt asked him, without ever lifting her gaze from the immaculate scroll she was reading. "If you weren't here, where would you be?"

Naruto thought for a moment before answering truthfully. "In my room, hiding from people."

"Why?" was the immediate inquiry by his Aunt.

Uncomfortable about the question, Naruto did his best to answer it truthfully again. "Because... m' afraid of doing something wrong and making someone mad... like yesterday." The last few words were whispered out in hesitation, Naruto was most definitely not prepared to go through what had happened yesterday again.

Yesterday was one of the rare holidays within the Kuunoki village, and as such, Naruto took it as a day to celebrate so he tried to play a prank on the village to liven its spirits and make people laugh. Unfortunately, he had not counted on the Seven Council Members to catch him on the act. What happened next was NOT something Naruto would ever dare to go through again. His very veins and nerves still throb with pain due to the possession. (1) As such, Naruto had become rather skittish and afraid of doing anything (considered) bad again.

"So... why do you think you're here now, instead of hiding in your room?" His Aunt continued to ask.

Naruto pondered on this thought for a while. Instead of always thinking that 'I'm here because my aunt wants me to', he tried to think up reasons why 'HE' himself would rather stay in the presence of his non-interested Aunt instead of either in his room or in the presence of someone else. Almost half an hour of thinking critically, Naruto had his answer. "Because I'd rather spend my time with you than anyone else anyway. You make me feel safe, Lady-sama, safer than I've ever been. And... I... I like it here with you." Naruto muttered bashfully, which in turn, brought a small smile on his Aunt's face. The sun was shining brightly in the room at the moment and Naruto suddenly realised, he didn't care that he was in the room anymore, as long as he was with his aunt, the one person that seemed to make it feel right.

(END FLASHBACK)

I GOD! Was I ever that innocent? And how the hell did I return to that state of mind, even after I killed all those people? Heh... Aunt Ruri really is amazing... To be able to turn me back into a childish kid again, even after I became a mass murderer... Elle... Do I regret killing those men... Not really... but I do realise that there are better ways around it than revenge... I refuse to subject myself into becoming a monster like that again... Aunt Ruri somehow managed to save me from the darkness of my soul and turn me back into the childish idiot I was prior to the incident... So... I'm not gonna give up

on Sasuke either. I'm gonna find a way to set him free... just as Aunt Ruri was able to set me free... / Naruto thought to himself resolutely.

"I repeat. Revenge isn't everything, Sasuke. And now, I will prove it to you." Lifting up his left hand, Naruto bit into his index finger to draw out some blood. After that, he traced a small image or symbol onto the palm of his right hand. The symbol was just a simple circle with the word 'Yume' (Dream) in the middle of the circle. "I've never tried this before, but I've heard that this is how you do it." Naruto muttered under his breath, hesitating slightly in his actions, but he knew that he had to do this. To save the boy's sanity, he must know the truth. Looking back at Sasuke with determined eyes, Naruto asked him one of the most important questions of his life. "Do you trust me?"

Sasuke gazed resolutely back at Naruto's firm eyes, before he finally sighed in defeat. "Why? Naruto, why are you trying so hard to convince me?" He asked, tired of this unending tug-of-war in his life. No one had ever tried so hard before, no one had ever gone against the Uchiha's word so why Naruto?

Naruto gave him a tired smile. "Because I have faith in you, Sasuke. I believe you would have had a great future... if you didn't throw it away so easily."

"I highly doubt you'll change my mind, no matter what you do." Sasuke answered succinctly, even while his eyes closed – hiding the storm of emotion underneath.

"We'll see about that. I'm not giving up on you yet... so don't... don't give up on me either. I'll bring you back, no matter what it costs me." Naruto answered resolutely.

With all that said, Naruto gently placed the palm of his right hand (the one with the character symbol drawn on it) upon Sasuke's forehead. Once he felt a 'connection' has been made, Naruto too, shut his eyes in concentration. */ YOCHIGAN! (Prediction's eye) /* Naruto mentally commanded.

Instantly, both Naruto and Sasuke's mind were bombarded with images of the past, a past that both would rather NOT remember and yet it played a significant role in both boys' lives. It was a past filled with pain, loneliness, anger, hatred and vengeance; it showcased the dark side of their souls and yet, undeniably, it also showed the weakness of their humanity. The same humanity they tried their best to cling on to in times of despair. Here, all the masks are stripped away, revealing an undeniable truth - a truth that cannot be so easily silenced.

(FLASHBACK SCENES WITH JUMPS IN BETWEEN)

Eight-year-old Sasuke happily hugged his brother from behind, glad that today his oniisan was able to at least spend the afternoon with him, even if it meant carrying him around on his back because he was stupid enough to sprain his ankle. "When I grow up... I'll join the police force too!"

"Hai... hai..." Itachi gave Sasuke a tired by amused smile in return.

"When I grow up..." The young girl (2) hesitatingly muttered. "...I wish I could see... see what the world is like." She smiled brightly, completely believing in her own dreams and knowing that, if she tried hard enough, she could truly fulfil it and see through her current blind eyes.

Eight-year-old Naruto sat next to the young girl, unable to look directly into her hope filled expression, not willing to crush her dreams by telling her that she had a very slim (if not impossible) chance of achieving her wish. Since he was unable to crush her, he swore mentally to himself that he would do anything to help her. Smiling brightly himself, Naruto yelled in excitement. "Yeah! And I'll help too!" Both children laughed joyfully for the rest of the day and they chatted about anything and everything they could think of. A person could dream right? Naruto was not about to let anything

happen to her dream, he was not about to let her pursue her dream alone either, because protecting her was HIS dream.

Young Sasuke quivered on his knees, his tear streaked face was pale beyond the whiteness of the moon, his eyes gazed blankly, horrified at seeing and hearing the words that slipped through his once idolised older brother.

"You can awaken the same Mangekyou Sharingan as me..." Itachi spoke in a soft, monotone voice, gentle but deadly. "However, there is a requirement." Pausing for effect, Itachi soon continued with the rest of his explanation. "You must kill... your closest friend..."

*"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU **SOLD** HER! YOU... YOU BXXXXXD OF A FATHER... **HOW COULD YOU SELL YOUR OWN DAUGHTER!**"* Naruto yelled at the top of his young lungs, shocked with fear, gazing horrified at the half drunk, half sober man lying on the dirty wooden floor before him.

"You heard me... she's gone..." The bearded man snorted in his half drunken stupor. *"Nothing you or I can do about that now..."* The man tightened his grip on the bottle in his hand, lifting it to his lips, and the man simply let the liquid alcohol just pour into his mouth, trying desperately to drown out all his misery in one breath.

*" **YOU BXXXXXD!**"* Naruto screamed, shaking in unparalleled fury. *He knew that he was ready and willing to kill this man. But right here, right now, that wasn't his top priority. His biggest priority was to reach Elle before something bad happens to her. As such, he cursed under his breath, turned around quickly and smashed his way out of the trashed hut that somehow managed to be the only home Elle had ever had. Distantly, Naruto was glad that Elle was blind, so she didn't have the face the ugly reality that was her life.*

Sasuke stared dejected at his reflection upon the water's surface. "I wonder... what did you talk with mother about... father..." The boy muttered to himself half-heartedly. Sasuke slowly picked up a near by rock and dropped it into his reflection. The water rippled for a moment, before finally settling, leaving Sasuke to stare frozenly at the image of his brother reflecting off his original image. Gritting his teeth in sudden fury, Sasuke stood up and jumped into the lake itself, needing the almost freezing cold temperature of the water to cool his heated blood.

/Brother... no matter how deep I have to plunge myself into darkness, I will do it in order to kill you! No matter what happens I will get that power/ Sasuke swore to himself as he sank deeper and deeper into the darkness of the abyss that surrounded him.

/I'm a monster... just like Mrs Tanuki said... so I should be destroyed like all other monsters... I don't deserve to live.../ As Naruto thought this to himself, the now thin and frail boy, with deep sunken eye sockets and pale bony hands lifted the kunai up slowly as if it weighed a ton. The kunai travelled up until it rested almost longingly next to the boy's throat. The nine-year-old closed his eyes, gave a soft smile, as he slitted the kunai's sharp edge across his own throat.

*" **ITACHI!** " Sasuke yelled as he rushed passed the stunned form of both Maito Gai and Jiraiya, ignoring their shouts for withdrawal. Consumed by his hate for his brother, Sasuke blindly ran towards the man who had made him suffer, the man who had betrayed his greatest trust and shattered his life's dream, the man who had made him an avenger. Charging the Chidori within his left hand with all he had, Sasuke aimed his electrified hand towards his brother's ice-cold heart, aiming to stab right through the very man who had plagued his life since the incident occurred.*

Standing calm and ignoring his younger brother's outcry, Itachi seamlessly slapped away Sasuke's electrified hand mere centimetres before it contacted his very chest. A loud blast of

explosion erupted when the Chidori's path of destruction was suddenly halted by Itachi's very action. The Chidori, having nowhere to turn its effects, exploded, demolishing one entire side wall of the alleyway for several rooms in a row. The sudden silence after the blow was deafening to all the people involved.

Sasuke glared hatefully at Itachi. Itachi gazed piercingly cold at Sasuke. Both were at a small standstill that was not to last. "You're in the way." With a quick snap, Sasuke suddenly found his wrists broken and he screamed in agony. The child's cry seemed to suddenly bring both Gai and Jiraiya out of their stunned silence and both immediately launched into action. Seeing the green clad man and the white haired man rushing at him, Itachi decided to be rid of one of them at the very least. Pulling the broken wrist up, Itachi slammed his left leg directly into Sasuke's chest, crushing some of his ribs and knowing that at least a few of them had punctured the boy's lung in the process. With the sudden impact, Sasuke flew backwards by the powerful force of Itachi's kick, halting only when he smashed against Gai and brought both of them onto the ground in a haphazard landing.

For a long moment, no sound was emitted through out the room; finally, Naruto thought that he had gathered enough wits to admit his own faults for the first time in a long time. "I'm sorry." He whispered softly, knowing full well that his Aunt probably can't hear him now but would eventually pick up on it since she is an oracle after all. "I've looked up to you and Kaga-san for such a long time... ever since you somehow pulled me out of the darkness within my soul... but sometimes I forget... that you're human too. I'm selfish and conceited, I know, always running away from the truth. Always looking to you for guidance... I'm such a child." Naruto concluded his soft ramblings on berating himself.

/It's the same with every powerful person I've ever met. Jiraiya... I've always expected him to continue to look out for me... so the first time he left me alone... I couldn't handle it... I hate that loneliness... I

depend so much on others reaching out to me, that sometimes, I just cover myself in this silent depression. Elle was the first to reach out to me without my permission and I had failed her. Aunt Ruri had reached out to me and dragged me back into reality too... I refuse to lose her now.../ Naruto thought to himself. /I have to stop relying on others to look after me. It's time I stop being a child and start acting like a real Shinobi./

And then, his eyes became more determined. "But I promise you. I'll try to grow up. I'll do my best to live for myself, decide for myself, and take responsibility for my own actions from now on. I'm Uzumaki Naruto, both a Shinobi of the Kuunoki and Konoha, last descendant of two powerful clans. I won't hide from my duties any more. I'll become the next Uzumaki prophet and I'll still make Konoha proud. I promise I won't disappoint you, Kaga-san or my late parents..." With a small smile on his face, Naruto drifted off into sleep, too emotionally exhausted to keep up his duty of looking over his Aunt, and almost completely forgotten about the three Sand siblings resting only several rooms away.

(END FLASHBACK SCENES)

In the darkness of Sasuke's mind, he heard a voice. "Now that you have relived the past and present of both our lives... let me show you the future... of the path you have chosen. Mind you, this is only one of the many paths that lie before you, however, it is most definitely a viable result. Do you have the courage to face it, Sasuke... Do you have the courage to live by your decisions and mistakes, and take full responsibility of the consequences? Let me show you what it would be like, had you left to go after Orochimaru..." (3)

(Start of Secondary Vision) Psychotic Sasuke on the horizon! If you're a big Sasuke-fan, please DON'T READ THIS SECTION!

An older version of Sasuke slammed his Chidori charged arm into and all the way through the heart of his opponent. The man before

him bleed all over Sasuke's form, raining onto his face. However, the frozen, insane smirk upon Sasuke's face never wavered. This was what he lived for. It was for this moment that Sasuke had sacrificed all his time and energy working towards. Today... was the day he finally killed his older brother.

However, Sasuke was abruptly brought out of his musings by a shrill cry from behind him. "IIIEEEE! HANASE! (No! Stop!)"

"Please... don't hurt him..." Itachi's final words were whispered right into Sasuke's ears before the once foreboding man literary collapsed onto himself, leaning his entire weight upon his younger brother's shoulders. Unceremoniously, Sasuke ripped his arm out of his brother's chest, knowing that he had struck all the way through the man's heart and he would definitely NOT survive this fight. Twisting around, Sasuke glared hatefully at the person who had dared interrupt his long awaited vengeance.

Before him stood a boy of no older than 6 or 7, trembling upon the blood stained earth with absolute fear and a splice of pure, uncontrolled hatred within his mid-night black eyes. The boy had short black, spiky hair and wore a simple peasant's clothing. However, it was the eyes that captivated Sasuke. For in a split second, Sasuke noticed that those familiar black eyes turned blood red, with two dots swirling around the central pupil. There was no doubt in Sasuke's mind that this boy carried the same blood as his brother and himself. This was an Uchiha, the last of his sacred clan, other than himself.

"Well... Well... Well... What have we here?" The insane smile had returned as Sasuke walked slowly and intimidating towards the fear-ridden boy. Finally reaching him, Sasuke lowered himself and gripped tightly onto the boy's throat, slowly rising to a standing position pulling the boy up with him. "Heh... The bastard actually dared to BREED?"

The boy, having finally recovered from his shocked paralysis had given totally into his young rage, kicking and struggling against

Sasuke's formidable grip fruitlessly, choking and screaming in protest.

"Do you hate me, little one? Do you hate me for killing your sire?" Sasuke asked in deathly cold voice. The boy spat back at him, rebellious to the extreme. Sasuke's smirk disappeared as he used his free hand to wipe the spit away. Tightening his grip, resulting in the boy whimpering in pain, Sasuke mercilessly activated his own Mangekyou Sharingan and induced the boy to suffer the effects of the Tsukiyomi, forcing the boy to relive his father's death for the next 48 hours straight.

The boy's resultant scream echoed through the entire clearing for several long minutes, before finally, the boy's young psyche collapsed, leaving the boy in a blank state of oblivion. Sasuke inched his way closer to the boy's ear and whispered to his nephew: "If you want to kill me... curse me... hate me... and live a long and unsightly life... Always run away and cling to your pitiful life. And some day... when you have the same eyes as me... come before me as an equal Sharingan user... only then shall we fight... only then will you honour your father's death."

With that said, Sasuke released the boy to drop onto the ground like a lifeless doll. He turned and left the scene of his brother's death, feeling nothing but guilt and emptiness eating away at what's left of his soul. /This is what I've always wanted right? Then why... why does it feel as if nothing's changed... why does it feel as if I've accomplished nothing... maybe... maybe I should return to Konoha now and pay a tribute to my parents... just to tell them that I've fulfilled my oath finally.../ Sasuke never looked back towards the despondent form of his nephew, nor did he ever gaze back at the dead form of his brother. Nothing mattered to him now... nothing at all...

"Uchiha Sasuke! S-Class Nukenin (Missing Nin)! For trespassing on Konoha land, you will be executed effective immediately!" A band of

Anbu Hunter Nins descended onto the ground before Sasuke, blocking his way towards the tombstone of his clan forefathers.

Sasuke frowned at them, annoyance practically vibrating from his stance and body. "Get out of my way or I'll kill you."

"For your crimes against the Leaf, it is YOU who shall die!" The leader of the Anbu called as he quickly charged towards Sasuke, the other Hunter Nins following in his footsteps not a split second later.

The fight was short but quite entertaining in Sasuke's opinion. One member of the four man team had been disembowelled by Sasuke's summoned snake before the snake was burnt off by another member, whom was later killed by Sasuke and his own Amitarasu attacks. The leader of the group was easily taken care of after he had suffered the effects of Sasuke's Tsukiyomi and now only one member was left of the Hunter squad, the only member to remain behind and not attack Sasuke head on.

After a moment's pause, Sasuke decided to ask the man a few curious questions. "Why aren't you fighting? Were you that afraid of the infamous Uchiha Sasuke that you simply froze on the spot? Sasuke sneered delicately.

The man ignored the snit comment, instead, he reached his arm up and removed the cat-faced mask that covered his face, revealing underneath another mask – this time, a clothed one, which covered half his face. Even though the two had not met for almost eight years, it was still not difficult for Sasuke to recognise his former teacher, the infamous copy-cat ninja Hatake Kakashi.

"My biggest mistake in life would be the fact that I taught you the Chidori, a technique that was perfected when my best friend – Uchiha Obito, you're uncle – sacrificed himself to save me. The Chidori was a technique made by two people, two best friends. And yet... you used this same technique on your own best friend, before using it against numerous others. This technique should never have

been taught to you, never you." Kakashi replied gravely, his eyes emotionless.

"Heh. A technique's a technique, it matters not how it is used as long as it is used." Sasuke replied nonchalantly. And it was this nonchalance that finally spurred Kakashi to attack his ex-student.

The two Sharingan users fought for many long minutes, each one unable to find a flaw in the other's defences, each one unable to dominate the other. Just like the fight between Sandaime and Orochimaru so many years ago, the fight between a teacher and a student was most grave and emotionally taxing on both opponents. Though they didn't show, both their hearts were screaming at the inevitable end to this fight.

/Why am I here? Why am I doing this? Didn't I want to pay my respects to my parents, hoping that they would be proud of me for finally killing Itachi... but now... what am I doing? Why am I fighting against Kakashi? Do I really want him to die? Do I really want to kill him? WHAT AM I DOING/ Though Sasuke's mind wondered down a path of unending questions, his body and action spoke for itself. Kakashi was an opponent standing in his way, and anyone standing in Sasuke's way must die. It was that simple a philosophy.

Soon though, Kakashi started showing signs of fatigue, it wasn't easy for him to constantly hold the Sharingan open, not to mention the massive amounts of Chakra it consumed. Soon enough, Sasuke got in a lucky shot and rendered both of Kakashi's arms broken, leaving the man practically paralysed. "Leave, Kakashi... I don't want to kill you." Sasuke finally stated.

*Shaking his head in denial, Kakashi gritted his bloodied teeth as he directed his icy gaze at his ex-student once again. "I swore an oath to myself in front of 'his' grave. I swore that I would pull you down no matter what it takes. And I for one, **will** keep my promise." Kakashi stated his final words before he flipped up an abandoned kunai from the ground up to his teeth by use of his legs, then he charged at Sasuke once again, in a similar fashion as Zabuza once did when he*

charged towards Gato all those years ago. It was déjà vu all over again, but this time, Sasuke wasn't anywhere near as weak as Gato.

In a second, Sasuke had his Chidori charged and held towards Kakashi's direction. Kakashi, having reached his maximum speed was unable to stop, and anyway, he didn't want to stop. Slamming himself through Sasuke's Chidori charged arm, Kakashi continued to push through until he was close enough to Sasuke to slit the boy's own throat with the kunai in his teeth. "Paybacks a bitch, Sasuke... this... is for Obito, for Hokage-sama, for all those innocent people you have hurt and killed, and most of all... for Naruto." Kakashi whispered as he slowly died, impaled by Sasuke's arm.

Sasuke could feel his life blood slip through the wound upon his very throat, though not deep (since Sasuke had leaned back as far as he could from the close range assault), it was still enough for him to feel his life literary slipping away. Quickly ripping his arm out of Kakashi's hanging corpse, Sasuke used up the rest of his Chakra to perform a healing jutsu and immediately started to heal up the damage to his throat. /Thank god Kabuto-san had forced me to learn at least some medical Jutsu, or else I'd be dead by now./ Sasuke thought to himself as he swallowed a blood replenishment pill, to help him balance his sudden blood lost.

Exhausted, Sasuke took a few moments to rest his body before deciding to just leave the bodies as is and to continue forward to his destiny. For some reason, Sasuke didn't really feel much regret for killing his former sensei, and because of that, he felt guilty for NOT feeling guilty. It was weird, he knew he should at least be feeling something, but nothing came to him. He was numb to all stimulus.

As he trudged onwards, towards the graves of his parents in the heart of the Konoha Shinobi graveyards, a sudden though struck Sasuke, and it left him trembling. He was waiting for death. That's why he didn't really feel any regret because he knew that sooner or later, he would join his parents in eternal darkness. He would soon follow in Kakashi's footsteps and for some odd reason - that

comforted him slightly, knowing that he wouldn't be completely alone once he died.

Finally, he reached his destination. Two large stones bearing the names of his parents stared impassively at him and he simply stood. No regrets, no emotions, everything was done as it should. Sasuke prayed in his mind, prayed desperately that someone would find him and take his misery away, someone strong enough to defeat him totally and claim his life, releasing him from this estrange dream he was living. All of a sudden, he started to truly regret killing his brother and mentally scaring his nephew the way he did. Hell, he didn't even know the boy's name. And now, the boy would probably spend the rest of his life hunting down Sasuke, not knowing that Sasuke would probably die even before he grew up.

/What have I become.../ Sasuke wondered as suddenly, a familiar chirping sound of a thousand birds ran from the clearing of the graveyard. Since he was already almost out of Chakra and being too slow to react, Sasuke soon found an arm instantly struck through his own chest from behind, blasting its way across his bones, lungs, muscles and more, burning anything within its path to victory. Sasuke vaguely remembered he coughed up some blood from his lips.

The arm pulled out of him and he staggered for a moment before turning around to face his foe, the person who had finally claimed his life and set him free from this miserable existence. She had short, cropped, pink hair, and the most familiar yet amazing, piercing green eyes. "Sa...kura..." He muttered as he dropped onto one knee, still gazing almost in awe at this angel who had come to his rescue. He knew, this was the end for him. /At least... at least Itachi was able to leave behind a legacy... heh... I can't believe that it was Itachi that left behind the legacy of the Uchiha clan... while I... while I left nothing.../

Sakura spat at him and glared with a lifetime's hate visible in her eyes. "I hate you... Uchiha Sasuke." Those were the final words Sasuke would ever hear from Sakura's mouth, as she pulled out a

kunai and neatly severed his head off his body. And so ends the saga that was Uchiha Sasuke's life, in the end, there was nothing... nothing at all...

(END Secondary Vision) Hope that wasn't too gruesome?

Sasuke gasped out loud in the silent room, desperately trying to orientate himself back into stability. His heaving shoulders shook uncontrollably as all his muscles in his body tensed and released itself at a constant rate. / *It's got to be a dream. It's got to be a dream... It's GOT TO BE A DREAM!* / He mentally repeated to himself this litany, trying frantically to calm down and think logically.

"It wasn't a dream, Sasuke." Naruto's tired voice broke through Sasuke's racing thoughts. The black haired boy froze before slowly tilting his head upwards, only to see the pale, sweaty form of Naruto kneeling unceremoniously on the tiled floor before him. The other boy looked sick, tired and most definitely very pale. Why did he look on the verge of death? Was it for him? Did Naruto do that for him? Why... why did he care so much?

"It...wasn't?" Sasuke choked and whimpered slightly, wanting to believe that what he saw was nothing but illusions or hallucinations created by his own mind, but yet, a part of his soul – deep in his heart, knew that this was the truth.

"No." Naruto whispered, even as his vision blurred slightly due to Chakra exhaustion. "I told you before... that I would convince you that the path you had chosen... would only end in nothingness... The future that I showed you was one of many ends, but it was most definitely a viable option." He explained, closing his eyes tightly, hoping that he could push the nausea away, at least for a moment. Blood began to trickle down his eyes and Sasuke feared for the worse. Why! Why did he go to such lengths just to show him, just to save him? Is this what it meant to have a friend?

"I... I don't understand..." Sasuke continued to tremble, in shock, fear or sheer confusion, he didn't know.

Naruto sighed tiredly as he flopped down to lay flat onto the cold ground, spreading his weight onto the floor so he didn't need to hold his body up anymore. "The future I showed you... was one where you had set off after Orochimaru, and I had gone after you instead of the rest. During the fight between us, you killed me." Here, Naruto paused and tried to swallow the lump of pain that had suddenly lodged itself into his throat while Sasuke could only stare at the blonde haired boy with an utterly shocked expression on his face.

"After that... you just... sorta drifted... You helped Orochimaru kill Tsunade – the new Hokage... and well... after that you left Sound... You killed Itachi finally... but that was only after he gave up the life of a Nukenin (missing Nin) and had only just started to settle down with his family... You killed him in cold blood... tortured his son... returned to Konoha... and ended up killing Kakashi... Finally, it was Sakura who killed you in the end." Naruto finished his story and left the room to fill with complete silence.

The silence was choking in its hold, but it was necessary for Sasuke to think things through. He needed this icy atmosphere to pull himself out of shock and analyse what Naruto had just told him. / *One of many futures... only one... maybe I don't have to turn out that way... but... at the rate I'm going... aren't I...* / He couldn't help but ask himself.

"Just think about it, Sasuke. What do you want to achieve? What is your dream? And I don't mean revenge either, what was your real dream, before the massacre occurred? Who did you want to become? What did you want to become?" Naruto muttered under his breath, so soft even Sasuke had to strain his ears to hear. Slowly, the blonde haired boy dragged himself onto his feet, stepping slowly towards the door, which led him outside. He opened it, crossed the thresh hold, and slid it shut behind him quietly, leaving the brooding form of Uchiha Sasuke to his silence and his thoughts.

/ WHAT IS MY DREAM? What is it I live for? /

Two days had past since the faithful day Naruto tried an uncharted Jutsu of transferring his very visions (created by using the Yochigan) directly into the mind of his ex-teammate, Uchiha Sasuke. Once Naruto was outside the Uchiha's room on that day, he had immediately collapsed due to exhaustion. It took him these two whole days to recover.

In his case, 'Chakra' wasn't the problem at all, since he had literary an over abundance of it. And neither did he lack in the physical ability department, Naruto was as fit as a boy his age could possibly be. No, it was his mind that was taxing him using that particular Jutsu.

Though theoretically it worked, this wasn't the type of Jutsu one could try simply because one wanted to experiment. Even his Aunt, the Lady Oracle would prefer to use the 'Yume no Heya' (dream room) (4) instead of using this type of transferring of memories. The Jutsu was dangerous as there is no guarantee that the two minds will not accidentally merge between themselves or lose themselves to the visions shown. Naruto had taken a giant gamble with his decision, but in the end, the gamble had paid off superbly.

"WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING!" A screeching yell echoed through out his hospital room.

However, the draw back of his gamble was that the Hokage was currently ranting at him for his supposed stupidity.

"You could have LOST yourself in the visions! Didn't you know how many of your ancestors had practically GONE WONKING MAD after their experience in the Yume no Heya (Dream Room)! Those visions of yours are NOT something to be toyed with! They can affect your very psyche to such an extent that I even doubt any of the Yamanaka family members – who are specialists in Mind Jutsus, could pull you out! You... You reckless FOOL!" Tsunade huffed in

breathlessness, finally finished with her 2 hour-long tirade, and feeling much better than before. She went over and gave him a hug, nestling his head between her assets. "You dumb boy... what were you thinking..." tears ran down her face as she held him even tighter, she couldn't lose someone else, not now, not ever.

Naruto broke from her hold, giving her a sincere smile. "I'm sorry... but I had to do it, I had to show him."

Naruto took the opportunity to glance around his hospital room, curious about the layout and purpose of each instrument. Though he had had several experiences with visiting the hospital to get some part of his body bandaged – usually by Haku since he didn't trust any of the other Medic Nins and doctors, this was his first time actually staying overnight (5). His gaze shifted to the side of the table where it was filled with a small vase of flowers, some 'get-well' cards, a small chessboard (curtesy of Shikamaru), and a small gift wrapped up in plain paper.

His curiosity peaked, Naruto picked up the cards individually to read over who had sent them. There was one by Kakashi – surprisingly enough – just telling him to rest up and that for the moment, team 7 was to be disbanded – due to Sasuke's situation and the fact that Kakashi is now heavily in active duty and didn't have any more time to oversee their training.

There was a card from Iruka sensei, it had a 3D ramen image popup at the front of the card, of which Naruto really liked. Inside the card were several vouchers for free ramen, all vouchers were only limited to the Ichiraku Ramen stand – Naruto's favourite hawker centre.

There was a card from Haku, also scolding him for his recklessness before the ex-nukenin expressed his gratitude for having Naruto alive. The white daffodil and a card from Sakura; it basically expressed the same things as Haku, but also hinting of her own confusion and gratitude for trying to help Sasuke anyway.

There was another card from Neji, which really surprised Naruto. The Hyuuga boy had thanked him for helping him realise that destiny really could be changed, and for giving him the belief in freedom that he so craved, as well as a short 'thank you and get well' note at the bottom of the page.

Shikamaru, though not exactly a close friend or even an acquaintance but since the two of them were studying under outside teachers that were close to one another (his Aunt and Kaga-san), the two shared a strange affiliation to one another that they could not deny. As such, Shikamaru felt that it was more duty than anything else that made him come visit Naruto and left behind a small gift – the chessboard (with its associated chess pieces).

The last present and card left on his small side desk was a present from Hinata. Within the present were two small medical creams and a bandage, curtesy of Hinata. Strangely enough, the memory of the shy, timid girl brought a small smile onto Naruto's face. It was her innocence that really appealed to his inner self. She reminded him so much of Elle but at the same time, she was far more... more... Naruto couldn't find the proper words to describe it.

It's true that the two weren't particularly close. But if ever she were in danger, he would not hesitate to jump in front of her to take the blow. This feeling of protectiveness is similar to what he had felt for Elle, like a big brother protecting his little sister. But at the same time, she was a Shinobi – a fellow genin, she was supposed to be strong enough to protect herself and not need his help at all. And still, he was drawn to her.

No matter how hard Naruto tried, he could not rationalise his estranged and confused emotions towards the Hyuuga heiress. He had been taught by the various Dokudes senseis while living in the Hidden Air village that the Hyuuga Clan were one of the most obnoxious, self-arrogant fools in the world. And yet, here he was, face to face with the 'Hyuuga heiress' and arguable one of the most timid and shy creatures in the face of the earth. It was bizarre and

Naruto couldn't help but feel protective of her shyness, no, her innocence.

There was something pure inside Hinata, that he was sure. And that purity of humanity drew him in. It was like his tainted soul – the part that happily slaughter man after man because of the Elle incident – was attracted to and (at the same time) silenced by that pure, white spirit. It was no wonder that Hinata was accepted into the newly established Medic Nin Academy. She was perfect for the job. In fact, it was arguable that she was 'Medic Nin' personified with her caring personality and kindness.

It was surprising to Naruto how fast Tsunade was able to implement changes once she had returned to Konoha. On the first day of her arrival, straight after she was able to stabilise all the injured genins whom went after the traitor – namely Ino, Chouji, Neji, Kiba, and Sakura (to a slight extent); she was able to get the full story out of all of them and immediately started on implementing changes. On her second day, she had organised a small committee of high-ranking Medic Nins whose sole purpose was to attract talented Chuunins and Genins to study the art of Medic Nin techniques.

Tsunade had been appalled at the level of proficiency at the Konoha hospital and had made the establishment of a small Medic Nin academy the foremost of her priorities as well as shifting most of the Chuunin and Genin teams around, grouping the Jounins into teams of 2 or (at most) 3 to go out on missions.

Though nowhere near as organised as a 'neat freak' may be, Tsunade did manage to get the job done. Funny as it may seem, Tsunade had kept Hiashi as her second in command, even after the bungle he made with the Sasuke incident. She just pushed all the heavy paper work and minor details to him to handle while she controlled all the major projects still being undertaken. Such projects include: changes to the security structure, and even stripping some power from the own council heads – who were not amused of course but simply decided to remain silent for now considering they needed her advanced strategic leadership.

Things were changing, and at such a rapid pace that Naruto was slightly worried that everything would collapse even before the foundations had been finished. Luckily, Tsunade knew exactly what she was doing and everything appear to be running as smooth as silk, especially the classes for the upcoming Medic Nin academy.

The Medic Nin academy had been a past dream of Tsunade's and now it was finally coming to fruition. Though the student numbers were small in comparison to the normal Ninja Academy, Tsunade still couldn't have been more proud of the first batch of students to undertake the Medic Nin training. Sakura, Hinata, Chouji and surprising Ino as well, had signed up to become students and each had already been taken in by a personal sensei of their choice: Sakura with Tsunade, Hinata with Shizune, Chouji – due to his injury was unable to participate for the time being, and Ino with Haku.

Neji, since being recognised by Hiashi as a real prodigy, was welcomed to undergo special training by the Hyuuga main house once he had completely recovered from his wounds, under orders by Hiashi of course. Lee will be having his surgery in the next few days and as such, couldn't sit still and wait for it to come, he was that excited about the prospect of going back into training. Shino had brooded for a time after the Sasuke incident since he was one of the few people not involved in the event and was rather miffed that he was left out. But soon enough, the bug clan prodigy pulled himself out of his wayward depression and started serious training in the field of his clan – learning all about how to efficiently control his insect creatures.

Kiba was out and about now that his injuries were mostly healed, but you could tell by his reserved and slow walk that he wasn't yet up to his usual energetic antics. And coupled with Akamaru's now partial blindness in one eye, the once cheerful and arrogant boy had become far more sombre than anyone would have liked. Kiba had lost his bounce; he had lost his hyperactive sensitivity and he still blamed Akamaru's injury on himself.

If Akamaru hadn't tried to protect him, the dog wouldn't have been hurt in the first place. But at the same time, Kiba had become extremely studious in his studies, often spending hours at home or in the Library (since he couldn't actively train) studying up scrolls on techniques he could learn or read about his family jutsus. Secretly, Kiba had already sworn an oath to himself on the day Akamaru had been hurt. He swore that he would become strong; strong enough that he would not need someone else to save him again, strong enough to become a Hunter-nin and hunt down all the traitors of the Leaf or any other Nuke-nin. His near loss of Akamaru, coupled with the anger and feeling of betrayal felt by Sasuke's leaving had forced the boy into a defensive attitude of 'seek and destroy' instead of trying to understand and forgive. In just one incident, Kiba had grown up much faster than anyone would have ever thought and in essence, a few of his close friends had missed the bouncy boy's personality.

As for Sasuke himself, Naruto heard that the boy (like him) had fallen into a short coma for a time but he was able to pull through a few hours before Naruto himself. For now, Sasuke is to remain in custody but after Ibiki's attempt at interrogation, Sasuke had showed no sign of physical awareness. Though conscious, he seemed to be still in mental shutdown, unable to comprehend and not willing to 'wake up' so to say.

Naruto had been sad that his ex-teammate would willingly remain in a half-conscious, half-unconscious state but if Sasuke needed more time to come to a decision on his future choices, then Naruto was willing to wait for his friend. He truly believed that in due time, Sasuke would realise his mistakes. And though the boy had too much pride to apologise for his own wrongdoing, he would still do his best to redeem himself. / *Yes... All I need is faith...* / Naruto thought to himself lastly, before slowly shutting his eyes and willing himself to fall into a light, contented sleep.

"Are we ready?" The snake Sannin hissed to his right hand man.

"We are ready, Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto answered confidently.

"Then... let's set off... TO KONOHA!" Orochimaru yelled out his order to the thousands of warriors standing in front of him. Instantly, they yelled in reply, slowly but steadily moving off in hordes of black and grey masked men, women, and even some children. This was what their master wanted, this was what they're master will get.

"Soon... soon... Konoha will be mine..." Orochimaru promised himself quietly.

"Orochimaru has set off on his quest to destroy Konoha." The tallest of the four shadowed figures commended in mild curiosity, shifting his large blade on his shoulder slightly.

"He's still hell bent on his mad quest, yeah? The quest to learn all the jutsus in the world... Yeah? That man is rather stupid in the end, don't you area? Yeah?" Another of the shadowed figures cheerfully replied, almost bouncing on their feet in excitement.

"We should attack during the confusion of the battle between Sound and Leaf. Then, there will be no one to suspect us and even if we were found out, the Leaf would be too busy to bother us." The third member of the group ordered in a monotone voice, completely confident in his own plans.

"Then, lets not leave them waiting." The last of the four figures, and most definitely the shortest slugged along after the other three, considerably slower as he literary had to dragged his body across the floor instead of walking on it like a normal person.

(end)

(1) I mentioned before (in previous chapters, not sure exactly WHEN), that the Seven Council Members have the power to 'possess' people's bodies. Sort of like Orochimaru's Jutsus, but they

don't actively leave their own bodies or forms, they just mind control people and inflict pain on them through mental stimuli. It's a similar effect to some of the Yamanaka family Jutsu, but is far stronger than (let's say) Itachi's Tsukiyomi Genjutsu.

(2) If you haven't guessed, this is the first time I've actually had 'Elle' physically interact in my story, instead of just being 'referred' to.

(3) Believe it or not, this entire vision scenes were inspired by the Christmas Carol story – where the main character was visited by 3 Ghosts (the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Future) all on Christmas Eve.

(4) The 'dream room' is a special room inside the Uzumaki palace that you all will read about in later chapters. It's sole function is to connect with the special bloodline ability of the Uzumaki and enable them to see a full 3-dimensional hologram of their visions, instead of snippet. This room can also be used to show what the Uzumaki knows directly to their pupils, so its also a learning/educational room.

(5) The time where he stayed unconscious during the Chuunin exam – after the Forest of Death incident – not counted because they were inside the tower thingy and never really left to rest in an actual hospital.

Finally got this chapter out and finished. I'm really sorry for the excess wait, but be warned that from now on, I really have much less time to be spent on writing then anything else. And I also apologise for the slight twist in atmosphere in the middle of the chapter. I had half of it written a long time ago but had only recently found some time to finish off the rest of the chapter.

I can't guarantee when the next chapter will be out but be sure that it will be ACTION PACKED. Finally, my war is able to begin!

Once again, please read and review. And please don't bite my head off for the long wait.

War I

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Eleven: War I

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: Violence. Blood. Gore. A lot of violence... and a lot of jump scenes. Hope you get use to it. **And please, if you CAN'T STAND the blood, gore, body parts, et cetera - DON'T READ THIS CHAPTER!**

I must give a BIG APOLOGY to people who got confused last chapter. The last four characters that I described at the end of the chapter DO belong to Akatsuki. They are: Itachi, Kisame, Deidara (spelling?), and Sasori. I completely forgot that some people aren't following the manga and have only watched the episodes as they come up. I'm truly sorry that I wasn't able to explain things properly! I will try my best to describe each of the characters later on as they appear in greater detail so that at least you know what they look like.

I also must apologise for mistaking Deidara as a girl. It is now PROVEN that he is a male! I'm sorry for the confusion before hand and will start proclaiming his male stature from this point on.

Another interesting note, I just realised that the leader of the Akatsuki has the same 'Yochigan' eyes as those described in my story! You

know, the dot within a circle thing. This is REALLY interesting because now, I can actually incorporate that into the Faith Arc. Yeah!

Chapter 11

It had started off as a quiet evening. Naruto was still resting within his hospital room, Sasuke in his imprisoned chamber and the rest of the rookie genins in their respective homes. Even the Godaime Hokage is soundly asleep, safe in her office. Now that things had 'officially' stabilised, Hiashi had forcefully resigned himself from the position as 'The Hokage's assistant' and returned to his own family affairs, leaving the bulk of the work to Tsunade and Shizune.

Even though things seemed to be quiet and peaceful, the fates had actually got something completely different planned.

"Is everything ready?" A shadowed figure asked.

"Yes." A calm voice spoke up beside the first person.

"Then let's begin." The original figure hissed in delight.

Suddenly, the very earth of the land reverberated in a wave of motion, shaking and quivering as if an earthquake had risen without warning. There was absolute silence for a few seconds, even the bird; dogs, cats, and various other animals in the near by forest froze in complete stillness. And as quickly as the quiet came, it shattered with a loud explosion in the distance.

All life within Konoha woke to the sudden disruption, all Shinobis were already dressed and out of their homes, ready for battle in a split second. What they saw terrified them.

There were nine giant snakes curling and burrowing from the ground up, forcing their ways through the earth and crushing anything that

stood in their way. Unearthly screams suddenly rang through out the entire village – inhuman and human screams alike, as animals and people both found themselves in the middle of a nightmare.

The massive shockwaves caused by the giant snakes' various movements in the tightly structured streets of Konoha literally rendered whole houses to crumble like sand castles in the wind and the wave. Powerlines fell like blocks of Lego, cutting off all power supply to the entire village, rendering the entire town into complete darkness, lightened up only by the moon.

Another huge explosion from the Western edge of Konoha finally brought the stunned Shinobis into action. They realised they were under attack.

"WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! EVACUATE ALL CIVILIANS! PROTECT THE HOKAGE! GO TO THE BORDERS AND SEE WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON! WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!" Shouts of order and commands issued by Jounins or Chuunins helped moved the stunned crowd into motion.

Instantly, all non-combatants tried to find their way towards the shelters as best they could, trying to avoid the destruction caused by the snakes directly on their heel. Some Chuunins had taken up the responsibility to protect as many people as possible and to distract the snakes. However, even if they succeeded to distract one from its prey, another would take its place. Any jutsus that they had tried to throw at the snake had only led to their own demise. Fire Jutsu upon fire Jutsu rained down towards the giant serpents, but with a flick of its massive tail, the flames were extinguished. It was a horrific scene of carnage and slaughter.

"WHAT THE FXXK IS GOING ON?" Tsunade swore under her breath as she roughly slammed the head communicator on to her ears and directed the microphone to her mouth. "REPORT! GOD DAMN IT! WHAT THE FXXK IS GOING ON OUT THERE!" She screamed into the headphone. She had been woken abruptly by the

sudden silence of the entire village, her instincts warning her that such silence can only appear before a true storm. As such, she had immediately stood in attention before rushing off to the communication's station, just when the snake summons appeared. In a split second, there was chaos everywhere and even she had to scream at the top of her lungs to be heard above all other sounds. She had a sinking feeling that everything was going to hell from this moment forth but pushed all anxiety aside. What was important now to get as much information as possible and work with what she got.

A static sizzling effect echoed from her earphones. "Hokage-sama! ZZZZZZZZZ... Shinobis carrying the Rain forehead protector... ZZZZZZ ZZZ zzzzzZZZZ ... attacking the West gate... We're trying to hold them off... But there's too many of them..." The communication was cut off.

"Hokage-sama! Another channel has just reported in from the central tower!" One of the Shinobi subordinates working with the communication machines called out to her and she was immediately by his side, listening to the report on this end.

"GIANT SNAKES!...ZZZZzzzzZZZZzzzz... Crushing people with their tails and bodies... ZZZZZzzzzZZZZzzzz... people dying! EVACUATE CIVILIANS NOW!"

/ Snake? / "OROCHIMARU!" Tsunade growled loudly like a pissed-off lioness as her cub was being attacked. Suddenly, she snapped at several buttons on the central machines, instantly starting up the emergency alarms all over the village and opening up all communication channels to her signal so that she can finally send out proper orders to her subordinates.

"ATTENTION! ALL COMBATANTS! WE ARE CURRENTLY UNDER ATTACK BY THE SHINOBI OF SOUND AND RAIN! ALL JOUNINS MOVE TO THE FRONTLINES AND ENGAGE IN COMBAT AGAINST THE RAIN NINS IN THE WESTERN QUARTER OF KONOHA! ANBU GUARDS, SEEK AND DESTROY

ALL TARGETS WITHIN KONOHA PREMISES! CHUUNINS, EVACUATE ALL CIVILIANS EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY! AND ALL ACTIVE GENINS, SURROUND AND SET UP A THRID LINE OF DEFENCE INSIDE KONOHA WALLS, AROUND SECTIONS E, A AND C! ATTENTION! WE ARE CURRENTLY UNDER ATTACK..."

Tsunade's orders reverberated all over Konoha from the special sound system amplifiers built into various areas of Konoha.

With Tsunade guiding their actions, the rest of Konoha's current and active Shinobi force leaped into action. The Jounins moved off into the village borders, especially the western border to engage against the Rain Shinobis. The Anbu instantly started setting strategic plans of their own to deal with the cumbersome Snake summons while helping out the Chuunins in the evacuation procedures. Genins however, were the slowest to react. But due to the drills that had been run on random times during the year, they at least knew where exactly sectioned E, A and C were.

At first, Naruto had been completely surprised by the sudden onslaught of sounds and screams emitting from outside his hospital room window, but once Tsunade had uttered her orders, he too, had quickly prepared himself for some action. Though not completely healed, he was at least good enough to defend section C of Konoha, which just so happened to be the hospital area that he currently resided in.

Jumping out of his bed, quickly getting dressed and supplying his body with full weapons, Naruto leapt out his room window to land in front of the hospital where he found several of his other Genin fellows were stationed. Kiba and Akamaru stood proudly on one side of him even while Lee stood unsteadily on his other side. Naruto really wasn't sure whether Lee was up to the fight considering he had just recovered from his operation yesterday, but knowing the current circumstances, they really didn't have a choice.

"Oi! Naruto. Since you're a Chuunin anyway, you gonna lead us or something?" Kiba muttered to him, shifting nervously from one side

to the other, unsure of what he should be doing.

Naruto blinked in surprise. He had completely forgotten that he was a newly established Chuunin since Tsunade's return. He wondered whether he should be stationed with the other Chuunins finishing off the evacuation procedures. But after glancing at the number of nervous Genins slowly surrounding the hospital, he decided against it. */ Kiba's right, these Genins really have no idea how to act in such a combat situation. If they don't have someone leading them, they're screwed! /*

"Okay, here's what we do. Since I'm the newly appointed Chuunin, I'm gonna be in charge of this operation. Everyone hear me out." Noticing that he had all the gathered Genins' attentions, Naruto quickly thought up a plan and set it into motion. "You two and you two." He called, pointing to the various people at random. "Go to the top of the Hospital building and stand guard on all four corners of the building. Keep continuous watch on any oncoming enemy. Trust no one, if you see anything suspicious, light up one of the ninja flares in your pack and you will have some assistance coming to your aid." The four people he picked disappeared to their ordered positions.

"You five!" Pointing to another group of bystanders, Naruto continued his orders. "Go and help the Medic Nins and Doctors move all the mobile patients to a secure area. There will be some we won't be able to move so we'll still have to protect the hospital as best we can. Also make sure that the most important equipments and medical supplies are safely stored. By the time this battle ends, we will all be in need of them." The appointed five immediately left to assist the Medics still within the building.

"Lee. Can you still run?" Naruto frantically asked the green clad boy, whom only nodded back tightly. "Good, go and find Sakura, protect her and bring her to sections E. Help her take charge of that section." Lee nodded and quickly sprinted away, fully committed to protecting the lovely, pinked haired kunoichi whom had stolen his heart.

"What about me? Do you want me to find Shikamaru?" Kiba asked tensely.

Naruto only shook his head. "No, Shikamaru's smart enough that he would go to section A, himself. He also knows it's probably the place where he'll be of most help. For now, I want you to keep your nose open and tell me immediately if you smell any enemy coming our way, okay?"

Kiba nodded and Akamaru yelped in reply. Naruto then proceeded to relay to the other present Genins on which positions to take within and around the hospital building, creating the best defensive procedure if they were ever attacked. "Now, all we can do is wait." Naruto narrowed his eyes and he gazed into the distance where the giant snakes are still wrecking havoc.

That is, until an idea suddenly hit him. / *Of course, I can use summon against summon, can't I!* / Realising this little irony, Naruto quickly bit his thumb, knelt down onto the rough ground and drew a quick circle, writing the characters for 'fox' inside the circle before completing a quick seal. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! Come forth! Kibi-Kitsune! Kirin-Kitsune! (Summoning Technique – Kibi, Kirin)"

In a burst of smoke, both small sized kits were standing, wagging their tail at their owner, happy to be of service to him again. "Oi, Kiba, give me some of your soldier pills." Naruto quickly caught the pill the dog boy had thrown at him and swallowed it whole in one gulp. Feeling the large chakra surge flowing through his very veins, Naruto wasted no time in launching into his next set of seals. Once he had completed the seals, Naruto placed his still bloodied hand onto both foxes' foreheads before calling forth his next technique: "Fuuin Kai! Kyuubi Bubun! (Seal Release! Partial Nine Tails.)"

Instantly, both normal sized foxes evolved in to their offensive, battle-formations – Kibi with his five, long swaying tails and Kirin with her large size and two tails. "Go out there and destroy those snakes!" Naruto ordered the foxes and mentally gave both free reigns on what attacks they use. Both foxes quickly replied with a roar of approval

before leaping forth to do their master's bidding. Naruto stood still for a while before he turned away from his summons to let them do as they wish. */ I'm a Shinobi of Konoha. I will protect my home, no matter what the cost. /*

Kakashi stabbed a masked Rain Nin in the chest, before quickly pulling out the weapon of his choice and slashing another Rain Nin as he ran across from Kakashi. Flicking his wrists just so that the blood which stained his kunai were flicked off, Kakashi seamlessly dodged a clumsy attack from a third Rain Nin before disappearing and reappearing behind said Shinobi and stabbing the man from the back.

As he prepared for another strike, Kakashi felt the energetic form of his comrade and rival – Maito Gai – suddenly landing behind him. They were back to back, a silent promise to watch out for one another was passed between them and just as suddenly, both leapt towards the various targets again.

/ Something's wrong. / Kakashi thought to himself. From his earpiece, he was sure he heard the Hokage specifically state that they were being attacked by BOTH the Rain and the Sound. */ So... Where is the Sound? The only people we've seen so far are the Rain Nins! Where the hell are the Sound stationed? /*

As if Fate had overheard his doubts, it finally confirmed the whereabouts of the Sound Ninjas. Without warning, a whole section in the Northern most barrier walls surrounding Konoha collapsed, revealing another giant snake, but this time, the snake was huge compared to the previous one – it had purple scales and three strange spikes upon his forehead.

Kakashi shuddered at the menacing look upon the snake's manic eyes. */ MANDA! /* Kakashi remembered the last time he had seen the fearsome summon of Orochimaru. It had been the time when Orochimaru betrayed the leaf. The snake man had to literally fight his way out of Konoha since the moment Sandaime discovered his

experiments. Even in his dreams, Kakashi still feared ever having to fight Orochimaru and his boss summon. And now, his nightmare had come to life once again.

/ SHXT! There's no way the Anbu and Chuunins inside the city will be able to deal with both the nine extra snakes and Orochimaru and the Sound as well. / "RETREAT!" Kakashi ordered as loudly as he could be heard over the chaos. "RETURN TO KONOHA! THE SOUND ARE INVADING FROM THE NORTH! RETURN AND DEFEND KONOHA!"

In one giant mass, almost 80 percent of the Jounins currently fighting against the Rain decoys turned and headed back towards Konoha. Each and every one of them knew that Orochimaru and the Sound were a bigger threat than the Rain would ever be. Each and every one of them hoped that they could return in time to protect their loved ones, Kakashi and Gai included.

"FXXK! WHERE'S JIRAIYA WHEN YOU NEED HIM?" Tsunade growled as she leapt off the Communication's tower, jumping from roof-top to roof-top, heading towards Orochimaru's position. When she had first glimpsed the appearance of Orochimaru and his trusty sidekick – Kabuto – by his side (and a third teen with grey-white hair standing behind them), all standing smugly on top of Manda's head, she instantly knew what a mistake she had made by sending all the Jounins to the western front lines. Her assumption that both Sound and Rain would have attacked the same position at the same time had been crucially wrong. Now that the third Sannin had finally appeared, it was her responsibility – as the new Hokage of Konoha, as well as a fellow Sannin to stop him.

Strangely enough, she had left the communication tower and Hokage tower to the command of the two old Councillors – Homura and Kotetsu, as well as the newly qualified Chuunin – Shikamaru. The Hokage and Communication's tower had made up section A, so a large number of Genins had already formed a line of defence around the building, with Shikamaru taking charge of them. She

trusted their wisdom and knowledge of warfare to help guide the rest of Konoha safely away from all this chaos while she herself, continued on her pursuit of the traitor – Orochimaru.

Suddenly, the once absent Sannin was running along side her, preparing for the worse. "This time... this time we will finish it once and for all." He muttered seriously, his face showing absolutely no emotion what so ever. Tsunade could only reply with a tight nod in return, for she knew how much was riding on this final confrontation. She couldn't lose. There's just too much at risk. She couldn't lose... or else Konoha would cease to exist.

The Anbu had successfully cornered what was left of the giant snakes to the Eastern corners of Konoha, where the least number of villagers live. However, with the sudden emergence of a large Sound army, as well as the appearance of Orochimaru and Manda, the Anbu and Chuunins were finding themselves being pushed back.

However, their desperate pleas for backup were heard when another surge of Konoha hunter Nins and the returning Jounins (from the Western front) arrived just in time to battle off the Sound army and a large number of Nuke Nins (Missing Nins) in the middle of them as well.

Somewhere in the distance, Sakura and Lee had made their way towards the southern end of Konoha where all the most important infrastructure buildings – such as the electricity supplier, the water treatment plan and so on and so forth – were located. This part of the city made up the specified Section E. There was already a large gathering of Genins surrounding the area, including most of the Rookie Nine. However, with Sakura now in the lead, she quickly divided the large assembly up (with Neji and Shino leading two other groups) and sent them on their various responsibilities – namely, to stay in pairs or their assigned teams to set up a third line of defence, to kill any enemy on sight and if overwhelmed, call for help, and last but not least, to help any civilians that they could find.

With a hard slam, the door suddenly gave way, landing haphazardly onto the dusty ground. Finally released, Sasuke glanced nervously from one end of the empty hallway to the other. The emergency alarms rang loud and clear from this side of his confinement cell. Sasuke tensed his fist slightly; still unsure of what he should be doing in the current situation.

/ Should I take this opportunity to leave Konoha? I bet the person who is attacking is none other than Orochimaru. He's attacking to get me back, that's the most logical reason. / However, instead of feeling pleased that he was so important to the Sannin, Sasuke's mind drifted towards that of his fellow genins. / But what about Sakura and Naruto? Can I leave them a second time, especially now, when they need me the most? Can I... Can I truly turn my back to them and never look back... /

Sasuke thought back to the visions that Naruto had showed him a few days ago. Ever since Naruto's visit, Sasuke had been questioning his own motives, his own actions. Every decision that he had ever made since the day of the Uchiha massacre, Sasuke had taken the time to think through logically and analyse it from a rational point of view. What he found out about himself... disturbed him. */ I know I'm becoming a lot like Itachi... when I don't want to be... I know I'm following his orders since day one... when I swore that I wouldn't... Does that mean that I'll end up doing the same things as him? Does that mean that one day, I will kill my best friend and force the rest of my family and friends to suffer in my absence... are we siblings really that different? Why can't there be an easy answer, it was always so easy to act before Naruto came but now.... /*

He didn't have any answers. He still couldn't decide whether going to Orochimaru was a mistake or not, and he was still confused over his relationship with Naruto and Sakura. Had his betrayal completely destroyed any chance of them being a team again? He knew that Kakashi was thoroughly disappointed in him, but at least, the man was willing to give him a second chance. The new Hokage however,

was not so lenient. His original sentence had been to be imprisoned for at least 5 years before he could be released on parole. However, with this sudden invasion of Konoha, his guards had left to attend to more important business and so, he had found himself free and in a serious predicament as to what he should do next.

Finally, Sasuke came to a decision. *I'll let my emotions and fate guide me... I can't... I can't honestly decide on something to do right now... I'm still too confused... So I'll just walk around outside and see how everything is going... and then... I'll see what fate has in store for me...* Decision made, Sasuke slowly but surely made his way out of the confinement building.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx (*Tsunade and Jiraiya Vs Orochimaru*)

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" Two voices called out their attacks and an instant later, Gamabunta (with Jiraiya upon his head) and Katsuya (with Tsunade standing atop her head) faced off against Orochimaru and Manda.

"Well... this certainly brings back memories." Orochimaru hissed irritably even while the crooked smile stayed on his face, unmoving.

"This time won't end like last time, Orochimaru!" Jiraiya shouted in a threatening manner.

"Ku ku ku..." The snake man laughed. "Indeed it won't. Because this time, I can actually use my arms." And he lifted both his arms to showcase that both was perfectly fine, shocking Jiraiya and Tsunade into silence.

"How... It's not possible!" Tsunade muttered in utter disbelief.

"It's easy, when you have a few Dokudes working under you and when you have an immortality technique that can take over other people's bodies." Orochimaru sneered back in glee.

Jiraiya narrowed his eyes at Orochimaru's response. "Then you've already transferred to another body? That means that you won't be able to use Uchiha Sasuke until three years later."

Orochimaru's smirk remained. "Who said I'm interested in the Uchiha anymore? I now have his blood and his DNA sample, I can clone myself as many Uchihas as I want!" His inhuman eyes glowed with insanity and greed.

"You heartless bastard." Tsunade angrily spat out as she launched herself at Orochimaru, jumping off Katsuya in the process. Raising her fist and channelling the her body's chakra into her tightly held hand, Tsunade aimed to slam a punch directly into Orochimaru's face when she was suddenly tossed aside by Kabuto's twisting kick, now standing in front of Orochimaru.

"Your battle is with me, Tsunade-sama." Kabuto commented firmly as he pressed his glasses higher up his nose.

"On the contrary, your battle is with me, Kabuto." Kakashi suddenly puffed into existence standing on a near by building, aiming his Sharingan glare towards the other white-haired teen.

"Go take care of Kakashi-kun, Kabuto. Kimimaro-kun and myself can handle these two old geezers." Orochimaru snorted from behind Kabuto.

Kabuto gave his master a short nod of acknowledgement before jumping off Manda's head, heading in Kakashi direction. Within a few seconds, both combatants had disappeared from the scene.

"Now, let the fun begin." Orochimaru licked his lips with his long tongue, delighted at having two pawns to play with, especially these two pawns since they were none other than his ex-teammates. The newly introduced Kimimaro too, had stepped forward to face his master's enemies head on.

"Hold on a minute! There is still the Prideful Azura Beast of Konoha to deal with! I will not let you interfere with our newly appointed, miracle making (1), wonderful Hokage-sama's fight!" A green clad man standing on the opposite side of where Kakashi had once stood signalled.

Orochimaru grimaced at Gai's appearance, but more than that, he had always detested the man's choice of words. "Kimimaro-kun. Could you please get rid of this eye-sore?"

"As you wish, Orochimaru-sama." With that said, Kimimaro instantly jumped towards Gai's position, forcing the Jounin to back away as his opponent continued to run towards him, pulling out a strange white weapon from the palm of his hands.

"Now, there's only the three of us left. Shall we begin?" Orochimaru snarled one last time before launching into his own attack pattern with Manda.

XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX *(Ibiki & Anko Vs Aoi)*

Most of the Jounins had left the Western end of Konoha to return to the Northern side, just to combat the new surge of Sound Nins, leaving behind only a handful of Jounins to deal with the remaining Rain Nins. Morino Ibiki and Mitarashi Anko are one of those few who remained.

"Rokusho Aoi." Ibiki grunted distastefully as he stared at the man in front of him.

"Well, it's certainly been a while, hasn't it, Ibiki-san." Aoi sneered at the Special Jounin. "How's life treating you?"

"Hmp." Ibiki grunted again, narrowing his eyes in the process.

"What are you doing back here? You worthless coward! Traitor!" Anko hissed in irritation, even while she readied herself to fight

against the former Leaf Jounin.

Aoi held up his trusted sword – none other than Nidaime's famous Raijin no ken (sword of the Lightning God), as if taunting the two Special Jounins in front of him. "Remember this, Ibiki-san? I'll have to thank your younger brother for this. It was with his help that this wonderful weapon landed in my hands." Aoi laughed at the irony of the situation.

Anko continued to glare at the Rain Nin. */ HOW DARE HE! HOW DARE HE RUB THAT FACT INTO IBIKI'S FACE! I'm gonna so rip his head off! /* Taking a few seconds to glimpse at her comrade's blank face, Anko wondered if Ibiki was feeling anything by Aoi's subjection. */ I remembered all those looks that were thrown at me when Orochimaru turned traitor. They were not fond days indeed. If it wasn't for the Hokage supporting me, I may have been branded a traitor too... Damn this man for bring the memory of the boy back into Ibiki's life! /* However, if Ibiki did feel anything, his face remained emotionless – just as the head of Torture and Interrogation was famous for.

"I date... Is he dead?" Ibiki finally asked. There was not an ounce of curiosity in his dead tone, his eyes remained blank.

Aoi continued to smirk. "Do you really want to know?" He taunted back.

After a long pause, Ibiki finally answered. "No... I guess I don't. He is dead to me, has been for the last 3 years."

Aoi's smirk instantly vanished and was replaced by a frown instead. "You really have no heart, do you? Morino Ibiki."

"The one who doesn't have a heart is YOU! You BXXTXXD!" Anko snarled as she called forth her own attack. "Senei Jyashu! (Sublime Snake Hands)" Stretching her right hand out, several vicious green snakes emerged from her long coat's sleeves. The snakes seamlessly flew through the air and effortlessly wrapped themselves

around Rokusho Aoi, biting him in several places even while rendering him immobile.

/ SHXT! / Aoi thought as he tried to manoeuvre the arm that held the legendary Raijin no ken, hoping that with a slight swing, he could disengage the snakes from his body.

"IT'S NOT OVER YET!" Anko yelled passionately as she pulled with all her might, tugging the immobile Aoi in her direction at rapid speed. "TAKE THIS!" Twisting her arm around, Anko slammed Aoi's body hard onto a large tree. Releasing her snakes, she threw several kunai at the man's direction.

Quickly recovering from the impact, Aoi instantly tried to get away from the kunai's trajectory, succeeding in some cases but not in others – he received a few kunai cuts to his arm and legs. Landing slightly, Aoi pushed off his uninjured leg, running towards Anko at full speed, the Raijin no Ken blazing in golden fire in front of him. And just as sudden as his movements, his body stopped in mid-step. */ WHAT! /* Aoi thought frantically, wondering why he suddenly couldn't move his body at all.

"Kanashibari no Jutsu. (Body Freeze Technique) I wouldn't have thought that a Jounin of your calibre would so easily fall into my Ninjutsu. Just goes to show how weak you have become ever since you got your hands on the Raijin no Ken." Ibiki muttered confidently from behind Aoi.

"Senei Jyashu! (Sublime Snake Hands)" Anko called forth again. This time, she directed the snakes to attack Aoi's hand – the hand that was still holding the Raijin no ken. Biting deeply onto Aoi's hand, Aoi gave a small cry of pain before instinctively releasing the Raijin. Once the Raijin had left Aoi's hand, the golden blade itself disappeared and Ibiki quickly grabbed onto it and stuffed it back into his jacket.

"The Raijin no Ken is finally back in the proper hands of Konoha. Now is the time for retribution, Rokusho Aoi." Ibiki monotonously told

the struggling man (who was holding tightly onto his bleeding hand now that the snakes had released him).

Aoi glared back fiercely, he reached to his back and pulled out a normal looking umbrella. "Now. The real fight begins!" He growled threateningly. Throwing the umbrella up high into the air, Aoi prepared his Jutsu. "Ninpou! Jouro Senbun! (Ninja Art: Raining Needles)." The umbrella then started spinning in midair, due to Aoi's commands. Soon, large masses of needles were released from the umbrella, all-diving through the air towards Ibiki and Anko's positions.

The needles struck true, piercing deeply into both Ibiki and Anko's bodies, and Aoi smirked in triumph. That is, until both figures puffed into smoke and revealed that they were only small logs pierced by needles. */ Shit! Kawarimi? (Replacement technique) /*

"You really have become so much weaker than before, Aoi-kun." Anko's sadistic voice echoed from behind him. With a powerful kick to his side, Aoi was flung against another tree only to smash into its trunk, resulting in him suffering a few broken ribs.

Anko did not give him any time to recover however, she pulled out a long coil of wire, biting one end with her teeth, and flung a few kunais with the other end of the wire attached to it's handles. Almost like a copy of the preparations for the Uchiha's famous 'Ryuuka no Jutsu (Dragon Fire Technique), Anko's version worked similar to her Senai Jyashu (Sublime Snake hands), as some of the kunais' pierced into Aoi's chest while the others twirled around his body, wrapping behind the giant tree trunk before flying forward again to strike onto another part of the tree, rendering Aoi completely immobile.

This move was followed up Ibiki's own calmly prepared Jutsu. "Kyofu no Te! (Hand of Fear)(2)" Ibiki simply placed the palm of his right hand directly onto the forehead of Aoi and an instant later, Aoi was screaming at the top of his lungs. His desperate cry echoed through out the battlefield on the western side of Konoha. It was easy to dismiss the high pitch scream as inhuman. Though many of the Leaf

Shinobis present knew about Ibiki's new and improved fear-induced Genjutsu technique, none had had the pleasure of actually witnessing it in action. It was definitely something that they wished to never become a target of.

Once Aoi's scream had died out, Aoi simply passed out while still confined by Anko's wires and kunais. Anko gave Ibiki an impressed look bordering on awe. She whistled in admiration. "Wow. That was certainly a show. Hey, can you teach me that?" She asked energetically. Ibiki grimaced at Anko's delighted expression and simply moved away from the hyperactive, sadistic Kunoichi (3). The two then leapt off to their various targets. This particular battle may have been won, but there was still a war going on, and everyone was needed in order to win that.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx (*Gai Vs Kimimaro*)

Kimimaro stared impassively at his opponent. Unlike his master, Kimimaro has no distaste against the colour green, but even he had to silently admit to himself that the man before him was an eye sore.

Gai, on the other hand, was passionately shouting out a long speech about the power of youth and how Konoha will prevail against even these odds, completely ignorant of what thoughts were going through Kimimaro's head.

With a soft cough, Kimimaro finally drew the strange man's attention back to the fight that was supposed to happen soon. "Shall we get started? Once this is finished, I can return to Orochimaru-sama's side."

Gai grunted and narrowed his eyes but decided to remain silent just this once, standing in his preferred battle stance – feet together, back straight, one hand in front in an inviting gesture while the other hand bend behind his back.

/ This man is a jounin. I must be extra careful and not let my guard down. / Kimimaro thought to himself even while long shards of bone

punctured the palm of both his hands, gleaming in the light.

/ Bones? It can't be... / "WAIT!" Gai held up his right hand in a sign for 'stop.' "Do you use bones as a means of weapons?" He asked, voice unwavering, even while his heart raced at the possibility of facing 'that' particular clan. When Kimimaro only nodded in reply, Gai started sweating. "Are you... by any chance... a member of the Kaguya clan?" He finally muttered, and Kimimaro once again nodded in reply. Gai's blood pressure rose slightly due to the tension in his body.

/ The Kaguya clan... Their bloodline limit ability is to be able to summon their bodies' bones as weapons to be used against their enemies. But more than that, they thrive on battle. They are all highly skilled Taijutsu users and anyone who gets too close gets stabbed in return. I must be extra careful about my approach. / Gai thought to himself.

Holding both his bone pierced palms in front of him, Kimimaro muttered to himself. "Yanagi no mai (Dance of the Willows)." He then rushed towards Gai's position, thrusting one palm forward, of which Gai dodged to the side. Swinging around, Kimimaro swung his other opened palm towards Gai's new placement again. Gai managed to block the attack with his arm and aimed sidekick to Kimimaro, of which, the green-eyed boy jumped backwards to avoid.

After a short pause, the two men charged at each other again. Kimimaro struck forward and Gai dodged. Gai punched or kicked and Kimimaro ducked or sidestepped. Both Taijutsu masters performed a seemingly endless and deadly dance. Feet blocked feet, bones met arms, again and again, assault after assault, both combatants remained on a relatively equal ground, unable to perfectly strike the other.

After a few minutes of these intense close combat fight sequences, both combatants suddenly jumped backwards to take some time off and try their best to analyse their opponents' weaknesses.

/ He's fast and strong. / Kimimaro concluded.

/ Every one of the attacks I've launched at him was met with a block or a side step. This boy truly is a highly skilled Taijutsu master. / Gai mentally commended.

"Boy." Gai called for Kimimaro's attention. "Why are you serving Orochimaru?" he asked, truly curious as to why such a talented young man would waste his life following that traitorous snake.

Kimimaro retracted the bones back into the palm of his hands; instead, he pulled down the zip on the front of his clothes, exposing the 'gaia' seal that is present on his chest. Pulling one side of his shirt down, Kimimaro summoned forth his humerus bone from shoulder socket all the way down to his elbow, coupled with a second humerus bone with a razor sharp tip at the end. The massive bone ripped out of his shoulder, tearing through skin and flesh alike, leaving behind a large hole on his shoulder. Kimimaro silently pulled out the bone structure with his other hand, and the wound slowly but surely healed back to show clean skin, as the tear had never happened before hand. (4)

Gai successfully fought against gagging as he watched the unnatural sight of a man pulling his own bones out of his body. But once the procedure was done, Kimimaro finally took the time to answer his question. "I follow Orochimaru-sama... because I believe in him. As long as I am fulfilling Orochimaru-sama's aspirations... I will forever stay in Orochimaru-sama's heart. (5)" Kimimaro answered resolutely.

Gai's eyes wavered slightly in pity as he remembered a time where another person, just as naïve as this boy in front of him, also looked up to Orochimaru like a god. */ Anko had been devastated. Absolutely devastated when Orochimaru betrayed and abandoned her. She almost committed suicide several times over... Now, Orochimaru has another pawn to play with. /* "Do you truly think that Orochimaru cares for you, boy? Do you truly believe that that traitorous man would care for anyone else except himself? If you do, then I pity you, to be brainwashed so thoroughly by that man." He commented.

Kimimaro's eyes narrowed in anger. "I'm not wrong! I'm not brainwashed! It's all my own REASONING!" Kimimaro pulled up his bone sword in a ready stance and charged towards Gai's position. "Tsubaki no mai! (Dance of the Camellia)" A large barrage of strikes and swipes came Gai's way, but the self-proclaimed green beast of Konoha managed to dodge most, if not all of them.

Dodging another strike, Gai managed to thrust his palm forward and redirected the force of Kimimaro's arms, before following the move with a jump and a swinging kick in Kimimaro's direction. "Konoha Dai Senpuu! (Leaf Great Spinning Wind)" Gai called as he knocked the boy some distance away.

Cursing at his own mistakes due to his raging emotion, Kimimaro immediately stood up again. This time, he summoned forth small bone pellets from the tips of his fingers before quickly flinging them at Gai like oncoming bullets. "Teshi Sendan! (Finger Bullets)"

Gai's eyes widened at the onslaught of small missiles coming his way and instantly dodged by jumping up, and to the side. Kimimaro followed his movements by continuously firing bullets towards the green-clad man's new locations. Jumping, flipping backwards, ducking and dodging, Gai somehow found some time to reach behind his back and into his hidden Ninja pouch and pulled out a pair of nunchucks (5). Swinging the nunchucks in a practiced manner, Gai easily slammed the various bullets away with consecutive blocks and slaps. Finally, Kimimaro stopped with his barrage of bullets, as Gai seemed to be dealing with them fairly easily.

Kimimaro, knowing that all his attempts at defeating the Jounin so far were unsuccessful, decided to bring things to the next level – he activated his curse seal to level one. Instantly, dark tattoos of his Gaia seal started appearing all over his chest area. Not only that, Kimimaro could also feel a giant boost in Chakra to his already large capacity. Pulling the other side of his shirt down as well, Kimimaro easily called forth the bones on both his arms to pierce forward, out of their confined skin and flesh.

Gai seeing that Kimimaro is activating his curse seal, decided that it would be best to defeat the boy before the seal could be fully completed. He launched himself at his opponent, jumping high into the air before twisting around slightly to try and slam his leg directly down onto his enemy. "Konoha Shofuu! (Leaf's Rising Wind!)" However, his attempted assault was firmly blocked by Kimimaro's bone pierced arm.

Gai grimaced slightly as he felt his own bones within his leg crack slightly at the impact of slamming against the boy's bloodline limit. Quickly catching himself before Kimimaro could follow up with thrusting his other bone pierced arm in his direction, Gai twisted again and flipped over the boy, avoiding any major attack in the process. */ Damn. I can't attack front on anymore. /* Gai thought to himself even while he started running around the boy at incredible speeds, trying to find a blind spot to attack.

/ Fast! / Kimimaro noted to himself even while he readied his body for the upcoming attack. Instantly noticing Gai as he suddenly came closer, Kimimaro performed his next attack. "Karamatsu no mai. (Dance of the Larch tree)." Several more spikes of bone pierced out of his body in various positions and with him twirling on the spot, the spinning porcupine gesture easily prevented Gai from coming any closer, less he wish to take the chance of getting pierced more readily by Kimimaro's bones.

While still analysing his opponent for a weak spot, Gai quietly returned his favoured nunchucks back into his Ninja pack, knowing that it'd be practically useless against one of Kimimaro's hardened bones. */ There's no choice. I have to do it. /* With that thought in mind, Gai fisted his hands tightly and bit his teeth to stop from screaming as he willed his body to open up the first couple of Chakra gates. /Hachimon Tonkou! Dai-San, Sei (6) Mon... KAI! URA RENGE! (Eight Gates Opening! Number Three, Life Gate... OPEN! Primary Lotus!) (7)/

With a huge release of Chakra, Gai literary sprinted off in a blur of dust and sand, running at incredible speeds towards Kimimaro's

position. In a split second, he had reached Kimimaro and slammed his red skinned fist right into the younger man's face, punching him with enough power to bring a whole house down.

Instantly flung backwards by the powerful assault Kimimaro twisted in mid air and landed harshly on the ground, skidding along with his extracted bones, while trying desperately to get a good grip on the ground to stop his motion. As soon as Kimimaro had finally come to a complete stop, Gai appeared from out of thin air to smack his feet right into Kimimaro's lower jaw, pitching the white haired man sideways, flying through the air into another direction.

/ I can't keep this up much longer. Even though my body is mostly healed, but it still can't sustain the Curse seal for too long a time. I have to finish it now and return to Orochimaru-sama's side. /

Kimimaro thought vehemently to himself as he silently activated the Curse seal level two, while still in mid air. Retracting all his protruding bones from his chest, legs, arms and back, Kimimaro felt the familiar surge of tainted Chakra coursing through his veins, darkening his skin, elongating his claws and most of all, the development of a tail swinging freely.

With the transformation just finished, Kimimaro opened his eyes just in time to see Gai perform another swinging kick right into his face. "Konoha Dai Senpū! (Leaf Spinning Wind)" Gai called as his feet impacted against the hard face of Kimimaro again. But this time to his surprise, Kimimaro's newly formed tail suddenly sprung up and gripped onto Gai. So, while Kimimaro is being flung backwards by the force of Gai's kick, Gai too is being pulled in the same direction due to the tail that had grabbed onto Gai's leg.

In the end, we find both combatants slamming onto the hard ground underneath them. Catching his breath, Gai quickly disentangled himself from the dark scaled appendage and jumped away to safety. It was only then that he realised there was a change in Kimimaro's form once again. */ Shxt! This must be his curse seal level two form! /* Gai could only shudder at the half-human, half-monster like form in front of him; moving his eyes from the tail to the claws to the massive

bones stuck out of Kimimaro's once pale body. It was not a pretty sight.

"This time, you will die." Kimimaro confidently proclaimed as he slowly but surely pulled out his very spinal cord from the back of his neck. With a powerful pull, the long appendage is drawn free of its confines, standing as straight as a sword and made from the hardest of material. "Tessenka no mai! (Dance of the clamantis)" With a swing of his wrist, the seemingly docile piece of bone-made structure suddenly extended into a whip like form.

Caught by surprise of the estranged weapon, Gai suddenly found himself gripped within the confines of the spinal cord whip, unable to move or escape. / *SHXT!* / He thought to himself as he desperately tugged and pulled, struggling against the tightening grasp of the whip.

"Now I have you. Hana! (Flower!)" Kimimaro called again. This time, the thick bones summoned forth from his hand (the one not preoccupied by holding onto the whip) slowly but surely formed a strange cone like structure. "This is the thickest bone in my body, it will easily pierce through your pathetic body. This is the end." Kimimaro commended even while he raised his bone spear higher and readied himself to thrust the object forward.

/ There's no choice. I have to go all out. / Gai mentally concluded as he shut his eyes tightly to concentrate on opening as many gates as he could. */ Hachimon Tonkou dai-roku Keimon KAI! (Eight Gates Opening Sixth – View Gate OPEN!)* / With six of the eight celestial gates opened, Gai used his new surge of Chakra to force the whip to release him, freeing himself effortlessly.

Dashing forward and avoiding Kimimaro's strike with his spear, Gai landed an upward kick right into Kimimaro's chin (8) forcing the other man upwards into the air. Jumping up himself, Gai took up a strange fighting stance – that of a crane waiting to strike (9). He swung his feet - now burning with flames due to the increase speed and friction against the air itself – to kick away Kimimaro's tail, giving him ample

space to follow up on one of his most powerful moves. "ASA KUJAKU! (MORNING PEACOCK!) (10)"

In a single instant, Gai had punched forth a huge barrage of burning fists, creating a collage of flames forming the sight of a peacock with its tails all opened wide to greet the morning sun. It was a magnificent if not intimidating vision.

As soon as Gai paused in his burning punches, the flaming form of Kimimaro finally fell from the sky to land haphazardly onto the hard ground. Landing himself, Gai gasped tiredly while trotting along to see if his opponent is still alive. To his eternal surprise, Kimimaro was still burning, though unconscious and rather scorched by Gai's final attack. Gai debated with himself whether he should kill his opponent instead of letting him live, but in the end, Gai was and always would be a honourable fighter. This may have been a war crisis situation, but he would not strike a man while he was down. And as such, he only did his best to bind the unconscious Kimimaro and kept him knocked out instead of killing him.

Raidou and Genma(11) glared at the hordes of Sound Shinobis standing in front of them. To say the enemy was fanatic was an understatement. In fact, Genma would go so far to say that they were all brainwashed or something. After all, it wasn't everyday you see a large mass of people, all with slightly pale skin tinged with an eerie green colour, and when they open their mouths to talk, a strange green vapour escapes their lips.

There were even children as young as 8 or 9 in the army, all wielding kunais, swords, chains and various other weapons, even house hold kitchen knives for goodness sake. It was literary an unbelievable sight. One that brought dread and fear into the pits of hardened Shinobis.

Never in the history of warfare had a proper Shinobi army faced off against such a large and yet unorganised mass of people, it was simply unimaginable. There were at least ten thousand men, women

and children, some not even bearing Shinobi garbs, standing as the main force of Orochimaru's army.

Raidou, Genma, and their fellow Shinobis cringed at the thought of slaughtering their way through that crowd, but it had to be done. No matter what the cost, Konoha must be protected, for their own family's sake if nothing else.

Though the Leaf Ninjas suspected that all these people were under some sort of spell (perhaps Genjutsu), but they had no idea how to deflect or release the civilians from their imprisonment, and as such, they could only fight and pray for the best. The massive gathering of mismatched 'warriors' from the Sound, were actually brainwashed and currently under the control of Orochimaru.

Orochimaru had developed a technique in which he could implant a special, sealed, snake's egg into a person's body. That egg is swallowed whole and the serpent within is born inside the victim's body. Once the snake creature is free of its shell (and yet still resistant to the human host's stomach acids), it physically taps into the Inner Coil system and takes control of the host's body as well as mind.

The Snake-Sannin favoured this technique and named it "Hebi Noroi Fuiin no Jutsu" (Snake Bewitchment Seal) (12). This technique differed from the curse seal in that it only controlled the mind and body of the victim, and didn't give them any additional power source or deteriorates the victim's bodies by changing them into monster-like hybrids.

With their mind and body being controlled, the hosts become puppets to their masters; and the serpent symbiont living within them are only loyal to one person – Orochimaru (their creator). The serpents will stay within their host, living off the live mice that it forces the host to eat as nutrition, and will only leave when it feels it is too dangerous to stay inside the body (usually done through a really accurate punch to the stomach area).

However, the Leaf Nins knew none of this knowledge. Therefore, they have no way in knowing that the people they are currently facing would give their very lives for Orochimaru and his cause, for nothing more than death and freedom.

Sasuke stared almost sightlessly at the ensuing carnage that surrounded him. / *This isn't a battle... it's a slaughter.* / He concluded in his mind.

Indeed, to the naked eye, it really does look like the Konoha Shinobis were ruthlessly slaughtering their opponents. But when you look closer, you could see that the supposed inferior enemy held much larger numbers than the few hundred Chuunin, Jounin and Anbu that are attacking them. And even as we speak, the horde of slightly green-faced swarm of supposed Sound Nins were pushing the Konoha ninjas back.

Sasuke started feeling slightly nauseous as his eyes were unconditionally drawn towards the struggle between the two armies transpiring right in front of him. He watched silently as women and children had their heads sliced off, limbs broken and left to fall on the ground unnoticed and uncared for. The Shinobis of the Leaf cut down as many as they could, leaving behind dead bodies or body parts, before efficiently moving on to the next kill, never looking back nor showing any mercy to those that threatened their home.

Due to the Sound armies' haphazard collection of fighters – if they are to be considered as 'fighter's in the first place - it was easy for the Leaf Nins to kill off individual people because they weren't that powerful on their own. But as a whole, the Sound army could match the Leaf Ninjas: technique for technique, kill for kill. For every single Sound Nin killed or decommissioned, at least ten took his or her place. No matter what move the Leaf Nins tried on their opponents, they just don't give up until they are forced to stop fighting – namely, to either kill them straight away or disable their entire body forcefully. It had been proven that some of the Sound Nins, even while having

their very arms sliced off with a sharp kunai, would continue on forward until someone killed them properly.

It was all just too gruesome to Sasuke, bringing back horrid memories of how his clan had died the night Itachi went insane. And even then, their bodies at least remained intact. Here, Sasuke tried to push down his own vomit as he glanced over a decapitated head on one side of the building he was standing on, while the rest of the man's body laid else where in the bloodbath.

Entire streets were littered with body parts and blood. Muscles and organs that he had studied during his time in the Academy stained the very walls of buildings while the every inch of the ground were besieged with broken glass and various other obstacles to the fighters.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself and wincing at the stench of already decomposing bodies, Sasuke decided that he couldn't take anymore. Turning around, Sasuke chose the coward's way out and pulled away from his hiding stop, leaving behind a nightmarish scene of hell on earth that would haunt him for years on end.

/ I've got to get out of here. / Sasuke thought vehemently to himself. */ I... I'm not ready... not for this... /* In his mind, Sasuke continued to chant his litany of fear and shock, willing himself to runaway as fast as he could from whatever it is that scared him. Once again, unbeknownst to Sasuke consciously, the 'scared little boy' within his soul had taken control and decided upon the quickest action that would get him out of trouble. However, Sasuke had absolutely no clue as to what type of consequences await him once he had decided on this path.

Suddenly, a child's scream from near by brought him out of his mental struggle of fleeing the scene unnoticed.

"MOMMY!" The child cried again, sounding louder than the symphony of other screams, cries, sounds of rubble falling onto the earth and the snarling of the giant snake summons.

Without thinking, Sasuke jumped away from his chosen path towards the origin of the child's cry. Upon reaching his destination, Sasuke watched in horror as a young girl that he recognised as 'Moegi', a young friend of his teammate – Naruto. The girl had tears streaking down her face in an endless flow. She had bruises all over her face and her lips were bleeding even as she continued to cry for her mother, while still wearing her pyjamas even.

Moegi was being slowly strangled alive by a masked man. Her tearful mother watch helplessly from a few metres away, currently being held back by a man obvious a missing Nin as Sasuke recognised the slashed Stone forehead protector wrapped around the man's neck. Gazing impassively as the woman begged and sobbed for the men to release her young daughter, Moegi continued to struggle weakly against the other man's grasp. Slowly, Sasuke's anger boiled over.

/ No! I won't runaway from this fight! I can't runaway from this fight! I'm a Shinobi. I have a responsibility to fight. And more than that, I'm a Shinobi of the Leaf, I have a responsibility to protect the people of the Leaf, to protect Konoha... because... because it's my home! / Sasuke thought resolutely as he abruptly remembered all those memories from his childhood – the memories of good times – of playing in the playgrounds with his mother, of practicing throwing Shurikens with his brother, of walking around town proudly with his father. The sudden realisation that all those places - all those memories would be wiped out if Konoha no longer existed tore at Sasuke's heart and soul. And in that instant, Sasuke made his choice, a choice he would live by for the rest of his life. */ I am a Shinobi of the Leaf. No matter what happens in the future... I won't betray my home. I won't follow in Itachi's footsteps... I won't betray my own home. /*

With that resolute promise in mind, Sasuke jumped into action, performing several hand seals before disappearing into the very ground underneath his feet.

"Ha ha ha ha!" The man (whom held back Moegi's mother) abruptly found his laughter being cut off mid way through as he felt his body suddenly submerged into the ground until only his head was above the earth's surface.

"Doton: Shinjuu Zanshu no Jutsu (Earth Type: Inner Decapitation Technique)" Sasuke proclaimed his technique even while he quickly launched into another set of hand seals.

The man whom held onto Moegi quickly turned around to see what had happened to his companion only to find several fireballs flying his way.

"Katon: Housenka no Jutsu (Fire Type: Mythical Fire Flower Technique)" Sasuke called out his second attack even as he spat out small fire ball after fire ball at his enemy, Sharingan flaring brightly in the tense battle.

His opponent, quickly realising that holding onto the girl severely limited his list of offensive attacks, immediately threw the girl aside to concentrate wholly on the upcoming battle.

Moegi, crying out as she found herself being flung away, suddenly fell into the protective clutches of her mother, whom had been freed previously when the man that held her was incapacitated.

"Run! While you still have the chance." Sasuke grunted calmly, eyes never leaving his opponent's still form.

"Thank you! Thank you so much! I can never thank you enough!" Even while the mother sobbed in relief, she quickly collected her crying daughter and ran off into the distance, heart praying for the safety of the young man that saved her and her beloved daughter.

"You think you're some kind of hero, kid? You have no idea what the world out there is like. You ain't gonna survive a single day in the real world." The Nuke Nin (Missing Nin) in front of Sasuke taunted, hoping to distract the boy. Although the man remained calm on the

outside, he was intensely nervous inside because he had recognised the swirling red Sharingan eyes before him and feared the power held within.

"I may be young... and I may be naïve... I have every right to fight for what I believe in." Sasuke stated resolutely. "I'm a Shinobi of Konohagakure no sato (Hidden Leaf Village) and as such, I will die protecting my home." He confirmed.

The man's dirty brown eyes narrowed in irritation. "So be it, kid. Give my regards to hell, with you?" With that said, the man instantly launched into his own set of hand seals. "Doton: Doryo Dango (Earth Type: Mud Dumpling)!" The man called out, slamming both his hands deep into the ground and pulling up a large chunk of earth with him. Steadying his balance, the ex-Stone Ninja quickly followed up by throwing the giant projectile towards Sasuke.

Sasuke, having already copied the technique with his Sharingan eyes, opted to use another technique to combat it. "Katon! Goukakyuu no Jutsu (Fire Type: Powerful Fireball Technique)!" Releasing the giant fireball, Sasuke tensed, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. The impact of both the fireball slamming into the earth boulder created a giant explosion of flying debris and dust covering the entire immediate area. Sasuke took this opportunity to disappear into the dust while the man was distracted by all the loud sound and sight. Quickly reappearing behind the man, Sasuke charged his palms with the highest voltage of electricity his body could handle. "Raikan Mahi no Jutsu! (Lightning Shock Paralysis)" Slamming his palm into the back of the man, his opponent quickly crumbled onto the ground, knocked unconscious by the attack even while his body continued to vibrate with the intensity of the electricity coursing through the man's veins.

Turning off his Sharingan eyes and taking a deep breath to calm himself, Sasuke suddenly felt a slight shift from beside him. Heeding his instincts, Sasuke instantly shifted to the right, narrowly missing an invisible blade that came close to slicing his head off. */ What the! / I felt the air move as if something was slashing through it! /* Not taking

any chances, Sasuke re-activated his Sharingan eyes and instantly saw through the other man's invisibility illusion.

Suddenly, Sasuke realised how the man had escaped his earlier trap. This was a missing Nin from Hidden Stone village; of course he was going to know some way to escape Earth based techniques. / *But no matter, what I did before brought me enough time to defeat the other man, so it wasn't a waste .* / As Sasuke continued to debate mentally with himself and readied a Chakra enhanced kunai in his hands, he didn't notice his Sharingan eyes slowly evolving into its complete form – a third black dot surfaced onto the iris of his eyes, shifting the other two aside to give it more room.

Suddenly, not only could Sasuke see the Chakra coursing through his opponent's body, he could also see the 'intended' actions of his enemy, where the man attack from, from what angle, using how much force, et cetera. Every thing became so clear and crisp, so easy to read. It was with the littlest of effort, Sasuke easily dodged the man's attempted thrust of his weapon and simply slammed his chakra enhanced kunai directly into the man's heart – blowing a giant hole from the man's back and releasing a flood of blood and pieces of muscle, veins and organs. The man didn't even speak as he silently dropped onto the ground, dead.

Sasuke shuddered, suddenly realising that this was his first kill.

(end)

(1) Gai was referring to how Tsunade was able to heal Lee. That's why he called her 'miracle making'.

(2) Original Jutsu, so it belongs to me. Basically, this is a powerful Genjutsu that is activated when Ibiki physically touches his opponent. What it does is that it forces the victim to live through some very torturous situation. What the torturous situation is depends on what the user wants it to be. Think of it as something

similar to what Itachi would do. Since I'm no Genjutsu expert, I just left it blank to be filled in by the rest of you.

(3) I've been told that 'Kunoichi' (female ninjas) are spelt with a 'u'. I'm terribly sorry for the mistake and will do my best to correct my spelling from now on. But, if you do see 'konoichi' somewhere sometimes, please don't be upset because I usually don't pick up on these minor mistakes most of the time and it may happen, more often than not.

(4) I'm mainly following the manga pictures so expect a lot of gruesome description of what happened to Kimimaro's body. None of the anime's bone emerging through skin stuff is going to happen here.

(5) Nunchucks – a weapon made of two pairs of wood with a metal chain in between linking them. Probably the most recognisable weapon used by Bruce Lee in his many films. (Took me a while just find the English name for it, too!)

(6) Neither Inane nor Aone actually translated the English 'sound' of this word, so I looked it up on a dictionary myself. Hopefully it is the right translation for the sound.

(7) Inane called it 'Extreme' Lotus while Aone called it 'Primary' Lotus; I stuck with 'Primary'.

(8) Basically, I'm describing the first move of the Initial Lotus – where Lee leans backwards while striking his opponent up and into the air.

(9) For those of you who don't collect the manga and don't know what I'm talking about, if you can remember the movie – Karate Kid (the first one), then you know that I'm describing the final stance the main character of the movie takes in his Karate competition.

(10) The English translation came from Inane and Shanaro had something similar.

(11) Genma is the guy usually found with a stick in his mouth; he refereed the Final Chuunin Exams. Raidou is the guy with a weird burnt mark stretching across his face; he was the one standing behind the Hokage during the Final Chuunin Exams and was struck by a kunai.

(12) This jutsu idea belongs solely to Hitomi no Ryu. I have absolutely no claim on the Jutsu whatsoever! However, I have listed it on my 'original Jutsu' list which will be updated soon.

God! This chapter is sooooo BLOODY LONG! In actuality, I had wanted to include a section about the fight between Kakashi and Kabuto but looking at the 20 page long text, I decided against it. If I had done that, it might have taken longer to post.

Okay, okay. For the next chapter, I will finally have the Akatsuki members appear (Kisame, Itachi, Deidara and Sasori). I'm wondering, should I fully describe all four characters as some of the readers don't follow the manga and won't know what they look like; or should I just post a picture of what they look like on my site and then for those who don't know them, can just visit my sight to have a look. Which way is more suitable for you guys?

Remember to read and review. I hope you like how it's going so far. I know that I didn't really incorporate enough fight scenes in this chapter but I wanted to get an overall feel of it first before I go into the nitty gritty stuff. Hope you enjoy!

War II

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twelve: War II

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: (Continue on with the last chapter) A lot of violence... and a lot of jump scenes. Hope you get use to it.

For those who are wondering WHY THIS CHAPTER TOOK SO LONG, it's because of a SERIES OF MAJOR WRITER'S BLOCK! Okay? On another note, a lot of you were rather annoyed that I didn't really go into detail about what Naruto was doing in the last chapter. Well, here it is. Most of this chapter is about Naruto with very little mentioned on the other fighters.

Another Important note to readers, I have uploaded the pictures of the Akatsuki members that have been revealed as of now. I know this is spoiling it for those of you who don't follow the manga, but if you want to know what these Akatsuki members look, you're gonna just have to rely on the pictures, because I won't be going into too much detail about what they look like. So, without further ado, before you read the chapter just have a look at the concerned characters' looks. You can find them at the following address, which you can also find the link on my profile's page:

w w w (dot) a n g e l f i r e (dot) c o m (slash) a n i m e 3 (slash) k a r r a f e a r (slash) k a r r a f e a r (underscore) f a n f i c t i o n (slash) a k a t s u k i (dot) h t m remember it is 'htm' not 'html' and of course the link is without all the spaces

Chapter 12

"Looks like the party has started without us. Do we simply jump in?" The blue-skinned, shark like man huffed in suppressed excitement, just waiting for the chance to start shredding skin and flesh from human bones.

"No. We find the target first and then we step in." A medium height male with ebony hair said in a monotonous voice.

"Who made you the boss, Itachi?" The shortest of the four grunted in annoyance at having his superiority so effortlessly ignored by the first two members.

"I know the target the best. He should be doing his duty right about now, protecting as many civilians as possible. So we should head towards where a large number of civilians are usually kept." Itachi stated simply, as if it's a fact.

"Mah. Mah. There's plenty for everyone once things get started. Hmm." The last of the four waved his hand around, trying to disperse the tension in the air. "Looks like I'll be the one to find this Jinchuuriki (power of human sacrifice), ne?" The blonde haired man shrugged in nonchalance as he reached into his bag (which was strapped over his shoulders) to pull out some clay. Effortlessly moulding the clay into a replica of a small bird (1), the man simply threw the small bird model up into the air before performing a single hand seal. A sudden burst of smoke and the clouds slowly dispersed, revealing a giant bird the size of a car. With its wings stretched out before it, Deidara gracefully jumped and landed on top of his replicated clay model. "So, what do you guys think? Of my artistic modelling? Hmm." The

blonde haired man lifted off his hat, showing off his high pony-tailed blonde hair and sharp eyes.

"Che. Show off." Kisame, the shark-like off scoffed at Deidara's transport mechanism. Though slightly impressed, he would never show his true perceptions.

Itachi remained silent.

"Deidara. Don't waste any more time. I hate it when I am kept waiting." Sasori grunted even while he remained still and unmoving.

Deidara slumped his shoulder in disappointment at his colleagues' un-enthusiasm. "You guys are so boring. Well, time for me to set off. Hmm."

With a large flap of its wings, the clay bird instantly rose into the air. Higher and higher it flew into the atmosphere until it stabilised at an accurate height to enable Deidara to find his quarry. "Come here, foxy boy. Let's see where you're hiding, hmm." Deidara chuckled to himself as he adjusted the single eye periscope to see far in the distance.

It didn't take long for him to find the Kyuubi host. All he really had to do was find someone who has using a large amount of high-end Jutsus while surrounded by what seems to be Genin level Shinobis. "There. Got ya!" Deidara grunted even while he replied back to his comrades (via microphone) about the whereabouts of their prey.

Silently listening to Deidara's message, Itachi finally decided on their next course of action. "He's near the Konoha Hospital. Let's go." Without further ado, all three mysterious Akatsuki members still left on the ground disappeared into their surrounding.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx (Naruto Vs Deidara)

Upon arriving at his destination, Deidara watched impassively as the Kyuubi host seem to be moulding some kind of black Chakra. It peaked Deidara's interest to the point that the man decided to just hang back a bit and see what the boy was up to. Suddenly, the blonde haired kid looked up straight at him with bright blue eyes blazing with gold circles. */ Isn't that the... /* Deidara's thoughts were quickly interrupted as Naruto unleashed the technique that he had been building up since sensing Deidara's presence in the near by vicinity.

"KAKURYUU HON NO JUTSU! (Black Dragon Flame)" (2) Naruto shouted as he released the spirit dragon from within the black flaming egg that he had spent so long preparing. A giant roar accompanied the birth of the Black Fire Dragon spirit as it burst through its confinement and streaked across the sky, heading directly towards Deidara.

Deidara instinctively urged his bird to dodge the flaming scales of the strange black dragon as it passed by Deidara's form, barely missing its target. Swiftly turning around, Deidara frowned as the Black Dragon form had twisted in mid air again before returning to attack him again. Silently moulding another smaller clay bird model, Deidara threw it towards the incoming dragon. The bird model morphed into its life-size counterpart and approached the dragon swiftly. Once it was near enough, Deidara activated its hidden potential by performing another single hand seal.

"Art... is a bang." Instantly, the small bird exploded in a massive burst of energy and smoke. However, the slight smirk on Deidara's face disappeared as soon as the Black Dragon Flame surged out of the smoke caused by the previous explosion. */ I see, looks like my art isn't going to affect that thing at all... perhaps it's not materialistic... nothing physical... which will explain why it won't be stopped by my explosions. However, there's bound to be 'energy' inside that thing. And if I can disrupt its energy flow then it can be killed. /* Deidara analysed as he continued to evade the black flames to the best of his ability while continuing to sprout out small birds or

other animal replicates that exploded every so often in front of the dragon, hoping that the energy release in his jutsus would disrupt the dragon's own flow of Chakra.

However after a while of playing tag with the dragon, nothing seemed to be affecting the spirit creature and Deidara began to get annoyed. */ I'm slowly running out of clay ./* He thought to himself as he searched through his bag again. */ Looks like this thing is made up of something that is completely different from Charka... And since it's made out of flames, I can't 'eat' it and change its properties into exploding material. Looks like I won't be able to hold back at all, especially if the brat is using his Yochigan as I suspect he is. /*

Moulding his clay once again, Deidara pulled out a large, strange looking clay model. It doesn't look like a bird but it does have flat, paper like wings, with two human-like heads on opposite sides of each other. The white ghost-like model perched delicately in one of Deidara's hand as he smiled cruelly once again. */ Looks like I'm gonna have to force his hand with my favourite, #18. /* Activating his most powerful explosive model, the small clay model instantly morphed into a replica of itself, only in the size of a small house. "Let's see what you're gonna do when I try to destroy Konoha." With that said, the odd looking object suddenly dropped straight down onto the village of the Leaf.

Down below in the streets of Konoha, Naruto watched impassively with his eyes still blazing with gold rings. He stood motionlessly, watching silently as image upon image juxtaposed against each other in his mind's eye. With the Yochigan activated in such a combat situation, Naruto could see exactly what Deidara was going to do even before the man thought of doing it in the first place. He knew exactly what that strange clay object was capable of and instantly commanded this black dragon spirit to change course, heading straight for the bomb instead.

High above the Uzumaki heir, Deidara smirked at seeing the Dragon change course, feeling triumphant that he had forced the boy's hand.

When the Black dragon spirit impacted against the clay bomb still quite high in the atmosphere, a huge explosion erupted from the two's collision. A giant ball of flames comparable to a nuclear fusion created a violent eruption of waves or vibrations that shook Konoha to its very foundations. However, when Deidara had expected his favourite #18 to push through and destroy at least part of Konoha with it, he was surprised when the giant ball of red fire suddenly became black and pushed the explosive debris back up instead of going down. Overall, it was looking like a nuclear bomb had been activated right on top of Konoha, without actually touching the Village even though every single person in the village could feel the very sheer power of this fight.

/ FXXK. / Deidara mentally swore as he wasted his favourite #18 on such a wasteful action. Deciding against thinking about it, Deidara refocused his efforts on finding the boy, only to see that his prey had disappeared from view and that all the hospital inhabitant had took the opportunity to flee. There was literally no one left around the Hospital vicinity (of which all its windows had been blown off due to the eruptions and explosions). "SHXT!" Deidara swore loudly this time as he had lost his quarry, and had no choice to start looking again while detailing his missing report to his comrades.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx (Kakashi Vs Kabuto)

Upon finding a deserted place to start their fight, both Kakashi and Kabuto wasted no time in launching into their offensive techniques. Both started performing techniques at high speeds and both seemingly finished their different sets of hand seals at the same time before calling for their attacks.

"Katon: Karyuu Endan no Jutsu (Fire Element: Fire Dragon Napalm)" Kakashi called forth his attack even while blowing forth a high-intensity flame barrage aimed directly at Kabuto standing some distance away. Even though the flames were produced from

Kakashi's mouth, it still didn't seem to burn his mask at all, which was a wonder to everyone.

"Doton: Doro To no jutsu (Earth Element: Mud Tower Technique) (3)" Kabuto completed his hand seals just before Kakashi released his flames. In that instant, the ground before Kabuto suddenly turned into brown, liquid-like mud. However, the mud seems to be spilling forth from the ground upward, quickly building a mould or mountain like structure not dissimilar to those of volcanos. Within seconds, the mud structure had grown to such a height that it completely obscured Kakashi's view of Kabuto. However, it was at that precise moment that the flames impacted against the half liquid, half solid structure.

The intense fire from Kakashi's Karyuu Endan constantly tried to burn a hole right through the mud mould, however, because the mud is repeatedly being spilt forth from the ground, both techniques refused to give way and process continued on for a while longer before Kakashi finally released his technique as he watched the entire mud structure melt into a puddle of dirt and sand, drying in the atmosphere and the exposed air. However, to the genius's disappointment, Kabuto had been long gone now. */ Shxt! Where did he go? /*

A soft vibration from underground alerted Kakashi to his hidden attacker and he jumped upwards just in time to avoid Kabuto's Chakra Enjintou (Chakra Scalpel) cutting across the bones, veins and muscles of his leg. Landing on a rugged pile of debris that once was a building, Kakashi threw a single shuriken towards Kabuto's location before performing another quick hand seal. "Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Shuriken Shadow Clones technique)." The single shuriken quickly multiplied into the hundreds, all heading towards Kabuto's current placement. Kabuto, seeing the oncoming attack, hid back into the ground, and all the shurikens struck the hard earth harmlessly once the boy was gone.

Seeing that his shurikens were practically useless, Kakashi unsummoned his weapons and they burst into clouds except one.

Pulling up his forehead protector to reveal his single Sharingan eye, Kakashi continuously looked over his surrounding in a serious manner.

Suddenly, he caught a movement from his right and instinctively moved away from his position. Just as well he did, Kabuto had unexpectedly revealed himself from the side and launched a technique specially known to Orochimaru. "Senei Jyashu" (Sublime Snake Hands), Kabuto called out as multiple, long green scaled snakes stretched across the distance and smashed into and through the crumbling stone structure that Kakashi had once stood on top of. Instead of stopping however, the snakes continued to move forward, catching up to Kakashi's speed rapidly.

Carefully dodging the snake's entrapment, Kakashi swiftly sliced some of the snakes up using a kunai. Finally, the snakes receded back into Kabuto's short sleeve and that was the chance that Kakashi had been waiting for. Pulling out another medium size shuriken, Kakashi quickly threw the weapon towards Kabuto at high speed. Unbeknownst to Kabuto, Kakashi had attached a very thin string of Chakra to the shuriken, making it a Chakra enhanced shuriken, destined to hit its target no matter what.

Twisting away from the projectile, Kabuto quickly noticed the unnatural movements of the revolving object, but he realised too late and was barely able to dodge the second assault with a small scratch on his exposed arm, leaving a trail of blood. While the shuriken twirled back towards its master, Kabuto quickly took the opportunity to hide underground again. It was more his style anyway to ambush instead of fighting up front battles, especially against such powerful foe as Copycat Kakashi.

Having already collected what he wanted, Kakashi quickly pulled a small scroll out of his vest. Smearing the blood collected off the Shuriken's tip onto the words of the Scroll, Kakashi re-rolled it back up before starting his hand seals. Slamming the scroll and hands onto the ground, Kakashi finally called out his attack. "Doton: Tsuiga no Jutsu (Earth Element: Earth Tracking Fang Technique)".

Instantly, there was a crackly on the ground some distance away before a disgruntled Kabuto was pulled out of the earth forcefully by the multitude of dogs biting on to his various appendages. Grunting in pain and annoyance, Kabuto glared at Kakashi with hateful eyes while the older Ninja just gazed back with an impassive expression.

"Now. It's time for you to die, traitor." Kakashi commented casually as he prepared his favourite technique – the Chidori. Bracing himself and pulling his right arm forward, Kakashi concentrated on summoning forth the massive amounts of Chakra needed to form the Chidori. It didn't take long for the sound of a thousand chirping birds to surround the two combatants. Once the Chidori has been stabilised, Kakashi charged towards Kabuto at full speed... only to be met with something unexpected.

Suddenly, a huge explosion in the sky interrupted their fight. Both combatants instantly stopped their intended actions, freezing in mid step and watched in silent, frightening awe at the spectacle of a huge ball of explosive energy slowly but surely rise high into the air. / *My god! What the hell was that?* / Kakashi thought to himself as a tingle of fear ran down his spine. / *Thank god that what ever it was, it didn't affect Konoha as much... /*

Kabuto, noticing Kakashi's lack of attention on him, activated his suppressed bloodline limit in order to release himself from this kind of imprisonment. Usually, Kabuto hates to acknowledge the fact that he has Dokudes blood running in his veins. But to deny his heritage is to deny the fact that it was his blood related Aunt that had killed his very own mother. However, even he had to admit that the Dokudes blood had its perks. One, it allows its inheritor to always be able to heal themselves automatically as long as the body had enough Chakra, and two, it allowed its inheritor to be a master at their own bodies.

Silently but quickly, Kabuto forced the pores in his skin to emit a soft coat of toxic poison. This was, after all, why the name "Dokudes" means 'poison handlers'. The special bloodline limit of this special Clan allowed its descendants to not only control their Chakra

perfectly but they were also able to control their bodily functions to become a host of multiple poisons – whether touch sensitive or even air borne viruses.

Using this bloodline, Kabuto easily poisoned the dogs summons that had him imprisoned, forcing the dogs to give way before it become too contaminated that it would die. Having a few dogs release him, Kabuto quickly pulled free of the others. */ That explosion type belongs to Deidara of the Akatsuki. Are they after Orochimaru-sama? Or is Itachi-san here to kill Sasuke-kun so that Orochimaru-sama can't have what he wants. I don't know what Akatsuki is up to, but I must leave to defend Orochimaru-sama no matter what the cost.* / Kabuto thought to himself as he finally disengaged from his assaulters.

Kakashi, having finally noticed Kabuto's struggle, quickly launched forward again to strike at the boy's chest. Kabuto, having no time to escape, lifted his arms up in a defensive position just in time to impact against Kakashi's Chidori. The sound of a thousand bird and the crushing of human bone and flesh mingled in the clearing, bringing a sense of dread to all who has the time to listen.

/ Did I get him? / Kakashi questioned himself, even as his eyes widened in shock. There stood Kabuto in front of him, spilling blood from his mouth, and having both his arms almost completely ripped off by the Chidori, but his chest was completely unharmed. The Chidori was still active and with his Sharingan eye, Kakashi could clearly see the multiple layer of chakra Kabuto had placed directly in front of his chest before he took the impact of the Chidori. The dense layer of Chakra had somehow blocked the entire force of the Chidori from entering Kabuto's chest, even while his arms were rendered completely useless.

"It's not finished yet, Kakashi-san." Kabuto grunted, grimacing slightly as he manipulated more chakra in preparation for the next attack. Kakashi, seeing the Chakra in the boy's body suddenly react, quickly pulled his arm back and jumped backwards to avoid whatever the boy had planned.

"Biransei no Jutsu (Poison Gas Technique)" Kabuto released a huge cloud of poisonous purple smoke from his mouth in retaliation.

Kakashi continued to move backwards, avoiding the dangerous cloud as much as possible while performing another jutsu in readiness. "Fuuton: Mugen Saijin Daitoppa! (Wind Element: Eternal Sand Blast) (4)" Though no where near as powerful as Gaara's version, Kakashi still managed to gather enough chakra into his chest before he released it as a gale force wind, pushing and blasting the poisonous air away.

However, to his disappointment, Kabuto had already taken the chance to flee the scene. */ Shxt. I missed my chance to kill him. Damn! /* Huffing in irritation, Kakashi glanced back up into the sky. */ I really hope that whatever happened before won't happen again. I wonder what the heck that thing was anyway? I better go and investigate. /* Kakashi thought to himself even his quickly disappeared from the scene, leaving behind only destruction and chaos in his wake.

While Deidara was busy feeling slightly lost, Naruto paused in mid step as his slightly glazed, golden ringed eyes continued to see thing beyond human comprehension.

"Oi. Naruto, what do we do now?" Kiba shifted nervously with an elderly lady on his back while he looked over the blonde haired teen. It had been a freaky experience when Naruto's eyes suddenly flared up with golden rings that seemed inhuman in every aspect of the world. As an Inuzuka and a Shinobi of the Leaf Village, Kiba have had sound knowledge over most Doujutsu (Eye Jutsu) that exist with special bloodlines in Konoha. However, the ones he was most familiar with are the Hyuuga and their Byakugans as well as the Uchiha with the Sharingans. Never had he heard of a Doujutsu that allows its inheritor to form golden rings around their eyes.

And not only that, it was a shock to find out that with this eye technique; Naruto could suddenly predict the future. Only moments

earlier, when Naruto had suddenly summoned forth his mysterious bloodline technique, he had ordered all the genins to prepare to leave the hospital vicinity, carrying any injured people or medicine that is necessary. He had pointed out accurately where a hidden trap door underneath the hospital had led the escapees' easy access to the safe chambers inside the Hokage Mountain. He even knew exactly when and where something was going to happen.

It was very unnerving but at the same time, Kiba felt unnaturally grateful for Naruto to have taken charge of everything like that. He, Inuzuka Kiba, had finally realised that to be a good Shinobi, you really need to have good brains as well as bronze. There was absolutely no way he could have fought off that weird guy in the black and red cloud getup while giving everyone else the time to escape without injury.

Finally, after a long moment of silence, Naruto answered Kiba after he had analysed all the possibilities of the future. "Kiba, lead them to safety. I will stay behind to handle the rest."

"What! Are you crazy?" Kiba shouted in shock and astonishment. "There's no way I'm leaving you behind to deal with all those freaks heading our way! Don't forget that Akamaru can smell their strength. And those three's powers were off the scale! There ain't no WAY I'm leaving you behind to deal with them." The dog boy was vehement about his decision.

"If you stay with me, you will die." Naruto answered succinctly. "And who said I will be fighting them one on one. I'm just going to be using Kage Bunshins to hold them back and wait for back up to arrive." He answered confidently.

"Oh..." Kiba muttered in embarrassment at his jumping to conclusions. "Well... in that case, okay then. Just... Just promise me you'll be okay, man?"

Naruto blinked slightly at Kiba's sort-of whining tone of voice.

Kiba looked away, flushing slightly in further embarrassment. "It's juts that... well... Hinata really cares for you... and... and if anything were to happen... well... she'd be really hurt, you know..." The boy continued to mutter to himself, trying to justify his own worries for his friend with what he could obviously see as Hinata's developing feelings for the other boy. *I Friend? When did I start seeing Naruto of all people as a friend instead of a rival for Hinata's affections... well... I guess after a while... I kinda realise that she would never really see me in that kind of light... so... I just want her to be happy. That's all. I* Kiba thought resolutely to himself.

"Thank you." Naruto's unexpected gratitude froze Kiba's mutterings in mid-speech. "Have faith in me. I will come back alive and well." With that said, Naruto turned back and headed off towards another direction, knowing that he had to draw the Akatsuki member's attention away from all civilians. If not for Konoha as a whole, then at least for his new found friends.

Naruto, as promised to Kiba, started off with creating a lot of clones to do his dirty work while hiding in a secure location. And with his Yochigan eyes still operating, he does not even need to be at the scene of the fight to mentally order all his clones to follow a specific set of actions and motions in order to prolong the fight as long as possible before backup arrives.

Naruto knew that Kakashi and Gai was only a few minutes away, and though Jiraiya and Tsunade were busy fending off Orochimaru, once they realised that Akatsuki was involved, they would instantly switch their attention to the bigger threat. However, Naruto also knew that with four Akatsuki members, there definitely wasn't enough powerful Shinobis in the Leaf that could keep them at bay. Therefore he was actually hoping for the cavalry from his Aunt's side to arrive.

But that isn't all Naruto worries over, with the Yochigan activated, he could also pinpoint exactly where his closest friends were at the moment and he could see if any of them will be terribly injured. From the flashes of images and knowledge that invades Naruto's mind, he

could tell that Sasuke and finally caught up with Sakura and the two of them had always worked well in a team, backing each other up when the need arises. Not only that, but Neji and Hinata had teamed up too to defend their home, the Hyuuga grounds. Chouji and Ino were helping guarding the entrances to the Konoha hideouts for civilians and Kiba is heading towards that direction as well. Shino was working with his father in the front lines, which is highly impressive considering his age and rank and Shikamaru remained at the Hokage tower, rearranging the troops as he saw fit.

Already, six out of the nine original giant snakes had been taken care of, that only leaves three large, uninvited guests, as well as the three boss summons fighting each other on the western front of Konoha. From Naruto could see of the immediately future and what were to happen to Konoha, a lot rides on when his Aunt's cavalry will arrive. If they arrive too late, then there would be nothing of Konoha left to salvage, so he could only hope that they arrive on time.

Sometimes, Naruto really hated the fact that even though he could predict the future, there were still enough uncertainties to leave him antsy and anxious. After all, the future isn't a straight line that can be followed, there are a lot of variations and opportunities for change, and if the path is changed from its original line, the entire destiny may be changed with it.

Not only that, Naruto also had to deal with the continual stress of having the Yochigan activated. Unlike his Aunt, who has perfected the use of the Yochigan and would have a small level of the technique activated at all time, Naruto has no such control and whenever he summons it forth, he opens it to its full potential, taking in every detail about his visions and stressing his mind terribly due to the information overload. He just hopes that he could hold the technique off long enough. Everyone and everything within Konoha depends on him, depends of his sense of timing.

Time truly is a precious resource. You either use it while its there or you lose it forever. And now certainly is not to time to waste any of

this precious resource. / I must have faith in my own abilities. I have to hold on. For my friends and for Konoha. /

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx (Naruto Vs Itachi / Kisame / Sasori)

While Itachi, Kisame and Sasori were searching around the deserted hospital district, a sudden series of popping sounds erupted, revealing a horde of around a hundred Kage Bunshins of their prey ready all waiting to charge. "Well, this was unexpected." Kisame grunted even while he lifted his samehada (shark skin) in a readied stance and grip.

As if a silent signal had been given to the horde, every single Naruto clones suddenly charged at their opponents. Sasori, not wanting to wait anymore, shifted his mechanical tail around easily piercing a bunch of clones in the chest, destroying them with a single swing. Kisame too, had hefted his trusty sword before swinging it around in an arc, slamming into clones this way and that, sucking the Charka that stabilises the Clone's existence and hence destroying the clones easily.

Itachi on the other hand, opted to perform techniques instead. Completing his hand seals at incredible speeds, Itachi released one of his favourite jutsus. "Goukakyuu no Jutsu (Grand Fireball Technique)" Itachi murmured as a giant ball of flame and power burst forth from his lips and powered through a bunch of Kage Bunshins standing in its wake. As expected, the number of Kage Bunshins in the surrounding area dwindled substantially to only fifteen clones.

However, that was all the time the real Naruto needs to show part of his true power. Feeling a strange vibration underneath their feet, all three Akatsuki members leapt backwards, barely avoiding the invisible force of a Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wrath) directed towards them from a few more Naruto clones jumping out of the ground.

Itachi, with his Sharingan open and staring at the opponent's strange use of Chakra quickly deciphered that whatever the boy was up to, it wasn't as simple as what it seems to be. "Kisame, Sasori, try to block whatever it is that he is aiming at you." He ordered emotionlessly, Sharingan eyes ready to analyse exactly what the potential of this threat truly is.

"Che." Kisame grunted in irritation though doing exactly as he had been told. After the many years spent as Itachi's partner, he could easily tell when his partner was curious as to the affects of a particular jutsu. And to have baffled the Uchiha prodigy so much, this kid must really be something. Sasori, on the other hand, wasn't as cooperating, and instead of standing guard decided to go on the offensive instead, stretching his tail outwards again towards his prey. Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned.

"TENSHI NO DOKI! (Angel's Wrath)" All the Naruto clones echoed as they charged various body parts with the precise chakra control enforcing a wall of revolving air particles to behind their main weapon of choice. Some clones slashed at their opponents using a wave-sword like technique, piercing and pushing back both the surprised Kisame and Sasori, one even going so far as to create a small crack on Sasori's tail due to the powerful force of the Tenshi no Doki wave.

Another group of Naruto's surrounded their own offensive team as a defensive barrier, lifting their hands forward and creating a wall of pure, high-density air particles. Itachi, deciding to try his luck, threw several kunais (with explosion tags attached) at the supposed invisible wall. The resulting explosions were huge in both power and impact, but still didn't even scratch any of the Naruto Clones hiding behind the seemingly weak, air barrier.

"Air techniques." Itachi concluded in a nonchalant matter.

"Hn. The boss was right, the Kuunoki is becoming too much of an obstacle to us." Kisame grunted in distaste as he shifted his samehade, thinking that perhaps he should try and suck out the

Chakra holding the air particles together, which would lead to the deterioration of the high-density wall.

Before he was able to anything though, a small bird rammed itself into the high density, invisible wall and large explosion resulted from the impact, obscuring the view of the other Akatsuki members and irritating them even more. "Oi! Deidara you bastard! Stop with the stupid fireworks! Haven't you had enough yet?" Kisame shouted in anger and disapproval.

"Mmm. I was just trying my hand on the matter." Deidara, still on top of his giant bird replied nonchalantly with a shrug, located some distance above them. "Maybe I should aim from the top huh?" Deidara pondered.

"No need." Itachi stated just milliseconds before the entire fortitude of Naruto clones burst into smoke from within the barrier itself.

"Huh?" Kisame murmured in confusion. "What the hell happened?"

"I sent a clone of my own, disguised as Naruto-kun to join their group some time ago. When I see fit, I had it explode, breaking the concentrated Charka from within." Itachi explained in a very straightforward way, ignoring the slightly awing looks his other comrades were sending his way.

However, they're success was rather short lived, since more Naruto clones chose that exact moment to rush forward, each one holding onto an ominous looking blue, glowing ball in at least one if not both of their hands. Eyes widening slightly at the recognition of this technique, Itachi quickly ordered the others to scatter and avoid the technique as much as possible, only to have his word of caution ignored.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx (Naruto clone Vs Sasori)

Sasori, having wasted enough time playing around, lifted his hand to the scarf covering his face and pulled it away, revealing a three-sectioned jaw piece that looks like it was part of a puppet to begin with. The three set piece of the jaw opened vertically down in an unnatural angle and shot forth hundreds of poisonous needles aimed towards the Narutos running towards his direction. Many clones fell into the trap and were destroyed but more rose to take over and ran almost blindingly towards Sasori's position.

This time, Sasori lifted his mechanical left arm with a strange contraption attached to it. With a soft 'snap' sound, the mechanical device suddenly flew forward; leaving Sasori's arm in its detached or decapitated form. The metal contraption fell in and among the clones before it abruptly reacted, spurting forth thousands of poisonous needles and other sharp objects towards any prey within the surrounding area. Some clones were able to avoid this mass attack by dodging the poisonous projectiles while being covered by those that had disappeared into smoke in the attack.

Having both his mouth's trap and arm's trap released, Sasori could only rely on his tail to fend off any more clones surging on his location. Unfortunately for him, the Naruto clones surged on him in one fell swoop, and one of the clones got lucky enough to slam a burning Rasengan (Spirit Bullet) right onto Sasori's tail.

The tail, being unable to hold back the power of a Rasengan, instantly cracked and shattered, scattering to all sides of the playing field, leaving Sasori rather vulnerable to future assaults, at least, that's what the Naruto clones seemed to think.

However, Sasori wasn't completely unprepared either, he lifted up his remaining hand (the human looking one) and opened out his palm widely. Instantly, multiple, invisible Chakra strings were drawn from his very fingertips to several Naruto clones, attaching his own foreign chakra to the Kage Bunshin's form, rendering them into Sasori's own puppets.

Sasori of the Red Sands, the ultimate puppet master, had always been famous for taking over other people's bodies, and clones were no different. After some of the Naruto clones had been turned into Sasori's puppets, the tide turned in favour of the Akatsuki member. This time, it was Naruto clones versus Naruto clones. And worse yet is that all of them look the same, so eventually, the once organised fight between Naruto and Sasori became a 'fight-for-all' in between masses of clones, some still controlled by Naruto, others controlled by Sasori. This seemingly endless dance continued until all the clones had been destroyed.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx (Naruto clone Vs Deidara)

Deidara, still standing tall on his clay bird model flying in the air, easily dodged any of the projectiles (whether they be kunais, shurikens, shadow shurikens, or any variety of throwing weapons) being thrown at them by the masses of Naruto clones on the ground. "Che. This is no fun at all." Deidara grumbled to himself as he watched the Naruto clones move around like ants, irritated at having their hive disturbed by an invader.

However, to his surprise, the Naruto clones weren't just harbouring around doing nothing productive. They were actually grouping together to make a counter attack. Having one clone jump on top of another, the bottom one holding onto the feet of the top, and then both jumping onto the third, and so on and so forth with a forth clone, fifth clone, sixth, seventh, eighth, and continuously on. Slowly but surely, a very tall chain of Naruto clones clung to one another swaying delicately in the wind while the lowest clone member was being supported on all sides with other clones holding it steady.

Once all the preparations were completed, with a mighty swing, the chain of clones swung dangerous close towards Deidara's position. If Deidara hadn't swerved away in time, he would have found himself being caught in either a Tenshi no Doki (Angel's wrath) strike or with a Rasengan (chakra bullet) in the stomach.

He whistled in appreciation, wiping an invisible sweat from his brow. "That was pretty close." But with an impassive face, he quietly moulded another small bird model before making it real and letting his explosive clay sculpture fly towards the tower of clones. "But this is getting boring. Mn." With another quick hand seal, the clay bird model exploded in mid air right beside the tower of clones, destroying a few of them in one go.

However, just as quickly, the group of remaining Naruto clones regathered themselves and made another tower of clones, this time, successfully catching onto the legs of the giant bird that Deidara was standing on. Deidara, seeing that clones had overrun his steed, quickly jumped off before making his once faithful mount, destroying all the clones on top of it as well as the clones hanging on to it.

Flicking his wrist, releasing another clay model, this time, it was a huge owl like creature that Deidara landed on, swiftly twisting away from the grasp of yet another tower of Naruto clones. "Mah. Mah. When will this bloody end?" Deidara hissed in irritation.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx (Naruto clone Vs Itachi)

The Naruto clones fending off Itachi had somehow cleverly manoeuvred their most powerful opponent away from the other Akatsuki members. However, just because hordes of Naruto clones were fighting a single Itachi does not mean that everything was going well for Naruto at all. In fact, there was a reason why the real Naruto (currently hiding some distance away and trying desperately to suppress his Chakra signature while using the Yochigan at the same time) defines the Uchiha heir as his strongest opponent. Not only was Itachi a master of the Mangekyo Sharingan but also as an ex-Konoha Anbu captain, he is well versed in Konoha techniques and its uses.

However, that isn't all Naruto is worried about. He had also been warned by Kaga-san some time ago, that Uchiha Itachi had studied under his own mother's teachings during a short period of time.

When Uzumaki Yuuki had stayed in Konoha for almost a full year, acting as a diplomat for the Kuunoki, falling in love with the Yondaime Hokage and later conceiving Naruto himself, she had spent some of her free time teaching one single child prodigy, Uchiha Itachi himself.

Itachi could be considered to be Yuuki's sole apprentice, as Yuuki had never taken a disciple other than him. Even though the period in time between sensei and student had been short, but Itachi (as a genius) was bound to have learnt much from his mother. And it was this fact that disturbs Naruto the most.

He had avoided using the Yochigan for personal gains like spying on his deceased parents before the day of Kyuubi's attacks, mainly because he was afraid that he wouldn't have the courage or the will to pull himself out of his visions once he had seen his real parents. As such, anything that concerns his parents, Naruto had avoided – this includes the time Yuuki had spent training Itachi. Therefore, Naruto had no idea what kind of Air techniques Itachi had learnt from Yuuki, nor does he have any ideas on how much knowledge Itachi really has on the Air village in general. And that type of uncertainty is quite disadvantages on his side.

Overall, Naruto had found a rather effective manner in fighting the Uchiha prodigy. Using Shadow Clones instead of the real him ensures that Itachi would be unable to use any of his deadly Genjutsu, as illusions have no affect on clones. Not only that, but the army of shadow clones also forces Itachi to either dodge their attacks or destroy them, hence using up precious Chakra in the form of high-level Ninjutsu or Taijutsu moves. Naruto had hoped that he would push the Uchiha into a corner so that he would willingly use his most powerful attack – the Amaterasu (Kaleidoscope Sharingan! Heavenly Light!) (5), but he highly doubts that Itachi would reveal his technique in such a minimal threat environment.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx (Naruto clone Vs Kisame)

Kisame, having long lost his patience and battle against irritation with fighting against clones, had quickly stepped up to using high-level Ninjutsu. "Suiton: Suikoudan no Jutsu! (Water Element: Water Shark Blast Technique) (6)" Taking a deep breath, Kisame released a giant gush of water in the shape of a shark, slamming into the horde of clones coming his way and destroying almost fifty percent of them in that one move.

Without waiting for the clones to regroup themselves, Kisame quickly launched into another set of hand seals. "Misu Bunshin no Jutsu! (Water Clone Technique)" Using the resultant water left by his previous Jutsu, Kisame created his own army of Kisame clones, all ready and eager to engage with the remaining Naruto clones.

Leaving the clones to battle it out, Kisame strode confidently away from the battle, effortlessly dodging any attacks the Naruto clones had thrown his way even though he knew that most of those attacks would have been fruitless as his own Kisame clones battled them off. */ Now lets see, where are you hiding brat? /*

Shifting the samehada into a better grip, Kisame enhanced the special weapon's own scent for chakra with a silent command and additional chakra for control. It is a well known fact that samehada has the ability to eat Chakra. However, not many people know that the samehada can also 'detect' chakra, especially if it's a high-level chakra capacity.

Using the samehada's unique characteristic and abilities, Kisame easily tracked the source of all the Naruto clones to a run down building almost on the verge of collapse. "Come out! Come out! Where ever you are, you little rat!" Kisame called out even while swinging his samehada in a giant arc, smashing into the buildings' own unstable wall and successfully pulled the entire building down around him. Once the dust and crumbling stone settled, all it revealed was young boy huddled to himself, shivering slightly from either fear or exhaustion, Kisame didn't know, but didn't really care at this moment in time.

Swinging the samehada around once more, the sharkskin sword quickly ate away at the remaining Chakra that the blonde haired boy was using, instantly leaving him with little to no chakra left. "Now. Let's go, brat. We've wasted enough time and effort on you to fill a lifetime." Kisame grumbled, eyes hard and narrowed. In the distance, all the Naruto clones that once held off Sasori, Itachi and Deidara disappeared into clouds of smoke, leaving their adversary slightly worn but without any major damage.

Leaning in on himself, Naruto clutched tightly his hands around his knees and continued to curl in on himself. He refused to deign the Akatsuki member in front of him with a reply. He may not have any more charka left nor does he have the will or energy to continue fighting, but he would rather die first than admit defeat. Consciously, Naruto knew that even if he summoned forth Kyuubi's Chakra, it would still be gobbled up by the samehada and he refuse to feed the strange weapon's hunger for more chakra.

With streams of blood dripping down his face from his tightly shut eyes (evidence enough that the Yochigan is no longer activated) and staining his clothes, Naruto willed himself to stay calm and wait for the opportune time to strike. *I Just a little bit longer, please. I have faith in all of them. I need to trust them to be here on time. Just a little bit longer! I*

(end)

(1) People who follow the manga, I know that that isn't ALL Deidara does to his clay but lets keep that a secret for now. It will get revealed later on.

(2) For those of you who don't remember, I used this Jutsu in Faith in Humanity Chapter 7, where Naruto fought against Orochimaru in the Forest of Death. It's basically a copy of Hiei's black dragon spirit (from Yuu Yuu Hakusho) only not as large.

(3) Original Jutsu

(4) Its the Jutsu Gaara (in his half demon form) used against Naruto in the manga Cannon series, where he breathes in a deep gulp of air before releasing it in one large force.

(5) Um... this is sort of my own English translation. Some people call it "the sun", "light of the sun", "ray of light from the heavens", etc. etc. It's really up to you how you want to translate that, but what I can say is that the "Amaterasu" is actually the 'sun goddess' in Shinto mythology. Look it up sometimes, it's very interesting.

(6) English Translation taken from NarutoFan.

Talk about suspense.

I didn't really wanted to add anything about the 'cavalry' part in this chapter but I guess it can't be helped. I had originally wanted it to remain suspenseful and keep you guys all on the edge of your seat. But now, well, I gave you all a small clue as to what would happen in the next chapter. And for some of you, it may already be obvious what will happen.

Anyway, once again, sorry for the long wait. But I'm really struggling with massive writer's block at the moment, especially with the fight scenes that is a big part of this war. Not only that, I'm being severely bogged down by my full time job that I literary have no life outside of this computer and my work computer. How sad...

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter. Please read and review, give me your thoughts if possible. I really do appreciate all of you who do regular reviews. And I'm sorry I haven't been able to update as often as I did before hand, but I've always been an irregular writer. I just write whenever I have the muse and sometimes, the muse hits me more often than other times.

Well, look forward to the next chapter – Restoration of Faith, Chapter Thirteen: War III

Arigato for reading my humble story!

War III

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter Thirteen: War III – 10 Gate Guardians!

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: (Continue on with the last chapter) A lot of violence... and a lot of jump scenes. Hope you get use to it. There will be a LOT of OCs appearing in this chapter and on-coming chapters. I will need all of you people to be patient and slowly absorb each of these characters into the plot. I promise I will dedicate as much time and space as possible to describe each of the OC's personality in detail in later chapters so for now, hold on to your seats and prepare for a wild ride.

FINALLY! LET THE GAMES BEGIN! For those of you who HAVEN'T gone to my website, you will have to now. To look at the images of the 10 OCs described here, please go to my website (address is at my profile's page), in the Faith Gallery section, there is a page dedicated to all 10.

I repeat, I will NOT be describing them in full physical detail here in this chapter, to learn more about these OCs, please go to my website. As for their character personality, it will be revealed in later chapters.

Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 13

Just as Kisame's large, bluish hand reached forward, ready to grasp onto the blonde boy's head, Itachi's voice rang out in warning.
"Kisame! Back!"

Heeding his partner's advice instinctively, Kisame jumped backwards just as a strange golden ring suddenly materialised in mid air and almost snapped Kisame's hand off as it twirled around itself rotating on a vertical axis. In the silence that ensued, the golden ring abruptly enlarged itself before flipping over and literally swallowing Naruto's body whole. The boy just literally disappeared as the ring (now with a diameter of almost a metre in length) slid over his entire body.

"What the FXXK!" Kisame grunted even as his eyes widened in shock.

A soft chuckle in the wind brought all the four Akatsuki members' attention to their right, where they suddenly found themselves surrounded on one side by 10 mysterious people, and their blonde prey suddenly reappearing behind the group of assorted teenagers or children.

Itachi narrowed his eyes and glared at the young man (around the age of 17 or 18) that stood on the forefront of the group. His long, light, purple hair did nothing to conceal the smooth, pale-white, practically albino coloured skin on the man's forearms. He wore a strange yet long white shirt that was shaped like a tank top for the upper body, but flowed down to form two long strips of material, one situated on the front of the shirt and the other behind. The long shirt was clipped in place by a number of golden rings surrounding the man's stomach area, acting like a metallic belt of sort. And underneath the big shirt, the man wore long white pants that almost covered his bare feet entirely. How the man was even able to walk with such long pants, Itachi didn't know nor did he really care.

But what struck Itachi's interest the most were the man's eyes. They were white with a pale hint of violet in them, with no pupils present. He knew those eyes. They were the eyes that belonged to the Hyuuga clan of the Hidden Leaf Village. However, he also knew of every single Hyuuga that had ever been born in the Hidden Leaf and he was sure that none of them fit this strange young man's description. That was when he finally realised whom they were actually facing and this realisation both excited Itachi as well as made him anxious.

"Jubei... Dokudes Jubei (1), I presume." Itachi murmured in a soft voice.

"Indeed. It is an honour to finally meet you, Uchiha Itachi-san. However, I just wish we could have met under a different circumstance." The man smiled unassumingly, almost a naïve, gentle smile. But Itachi wasn't fooled by the man's relaxed stance, he knew that none of the Kuunoki Ninjas were ever what they appeared to be, and especially true for descendants of the Dokudes clan.

"Oi. Itachi. You know who these people are?" Sasori of the Red sands grunted in irritation at having their mission interrupted yet again, but truthfully, he wasn't too bothered by it. These people seemed to be truly strong and he was just itching for a fight with them, hoping to collect some of their hides back to become more of his personal puppets.

"lie (No). I have never met the man but know of his reputation. He is the only Hyuuga descendant born outside of Konoha. The only one who wasn't killed before birth when..." Itachi's explanations were abruptly interrupted by the man's own description.

"When the Hyuuga council members refused to acknowledge my existence. It's rude to have a virtual stranger introduce people, Itachi-san. Let me have the pleasure of introducing my comrades, and myself instead. I am Dokudes Jubei, leader of the Kuunoki 10 Gate Guardians." Jubei continued to smile gently while he went around introducing his comrades, ignoring the various shocked

expressions on both Kisame's and Deidara's faces and body postures. Even Sasori had to grunt in surprise at the sudden revelation of whom they were actually fighting.

It was a well-known fact (well, as well known to those people who knew of the existence of the Kuunoki in the first place) that the 10 Gate Guardians are the only Shinobis to ever be regularly posted outside the Kuunoki village itself. Their job is to hunt down any traitors or escapees from the Kuunoki as well as guard the actual gate and border of the Kuunoki village. Only the 10 strongest fighters in the entire Hidden Air village were given the position of 'Gate-Guardian' and even then, it was completely unheard of that all 10 would be deployed at the same time for the same mission. Never in history had all 10 Gate Guardian been seen at the same place at the same time, or so the information stated but those who could have known probably didn't live long to tell of it.

Considering that every ten years or so a new generation of Gate Guardians were chosen for the position, which meant that the competition was very fierce to overturn the elder guardians, and that the Lady Oracle herself had handpicked a few for the positions in this current group this was a group of Guardians that would be known as the strongest for ages to come. It was enough to make all four Akatsuki members tense with anticipation. After all, even the leader of the Akatsuki had asked all of them to beware of this group, trained and bred by the Lady Oracle herself, they were bound to be a challenge.

Seemingly not noticing the tension in the air, Jubei continued to introduce the rest of the 10 gate guardians even while one of them (the youngest girl) knelt beside Naruto and started healing his eyes without being told to.

"Kazeha Akiko. (2)" This time, a teenage girl (around the age of 16 or 17) with wild, spiky red hair tamed slightly by a long braid dangling down her back, deep blue eyes stepped forward. She wore a small, skintight tank top and very short shorts followed by tough looking boots to finish off her looks. All the while, she smiled brightly at the

four, leaving the Akatsuki members wondering why she seemed to be in an eternally happy mood. Akiko also had a very unusual weapon strapped onto her back - it was a giant boomerang, almost as long as she was tall.

"Raitei Koushiro. (3)" A nod was all that was received from a honey-brown haired boy with a blue cap on top of his head, stormy blue eyes, wearing a blue and black jumpsuit, and white gloves on each hand. From his choice of clothes, you would automatically expect him to be suffering from some sort of cold or something.

"Raitei Hikari. (4)" Wearing similar clothing to the previous boy (blue and black jacket, cotton blue skirt, and white gloves), this girl (whom had the same honey-brown hair and storm blue eyes) tied a long bandana around her head instead of a cap.

"Kaiba Mishizu. (5)" A blue haired girl (wearing a lopsided hat) bowed slightly in a formal introduction. Her military looking, high-coloured, deep green, short-sleeved jacket covered her blue, long sleeve shirt and shorts, followed by long, blue boots reaching as high as her thigh. Her pale face (though nowhere as white as Jubei's skin) stoically stayed in a frozen state of neutral and blank expression, expressing nothing she felt or think.

"Shinzo Yami. (6)" This boy seems like a slightly younger version of Itachi himself (with ebony black hair and pale skin), if only you ignore his vibrant violet eyes that practically glowed under the sunlight, and the strange, intricate tattoo on the left side of his face as well as the strange black mark under his right eye (that looks almost like mascara). Like Mishizu, Yami seem to have a permanently neutral expression on his face also. Wearing the black, high collared, tight, long sleeve shirt and pants, it literary made Yami look and feel like his name's definition – dark.

"Oniyoubu Maya. (7)" An even younger girl, probably in her early teens straightened and bowed slightly. Her entire face was covered by bandages (including most of her hair); the only parts of her face that were clearly visible are her pale green eyes. The only parts of

her mid-night black hair visible were tied into a high pony tail, escaping the bandages around the top of her head to sway curly down the back of her head. She was wearing a strange garb - long cloth covering their throats, sleeveless shirt with a long sleeve jumper underneath, a long cloth wrapped around their waists, thick tracksuit pants underneath their clan embezzled waist toga, and short metal armbands on both wrists.

"Ryuji Katana. (8)" A very short, brown haired boy with piercing brown eyes, looking of the age of only 8 or 7 years old, stepped forward confidently, glaring for all his worth at the taller Akatsuki members. He wore some sort of traditional samurai attire – slippers instead of Ninja shoes, a slightly large coat, with flames decorating the bottom of the coat and tattered symbols of his clan on the sleeves. On both his arms, he has tied the Air village emblem on them and he carries around at 4 visible swords, two tied to his sides and two on his back.

"Kataichi Tori. (9)" Another young boy of around 9 or 10 years of age stepped forward unafraid, grinning widely at their opponents with naïve innocence. Wearing an old and tattered, green and red shirt as well as a red, 3-quarter-length, red pants, the boy looks as dangerous as a newly born kitten. But all the Akatsuki members were still wary, even of this young an opponent. After all, their leader had specifically told them NOT to underestimate any of the Gate Guardians, and even with such a young opponent, they refuse to let their guard down.

"And Last but not least, Dokudes Seiko. (10)" The young girl who had knelt down and healed Naruto's eyes, stood up straight and glared at the all the Akatsuki members with an icy, hateful look. Though considerably younger than the rest of the group, just her name had spun a tingle of fear down Kisame and Deidara's spines. This was the heir to the Dokudes Clan, arguably one of the most powerful clans of the Hidden Air village and considered the most deadly kind of people alive. Though just a child, sometimes, Seiko could become the strongest and most ruthless of all 10 Gate

Guardians, definitely not one to be underestimated, no matter what the cost.

With 10 new warriors standing on Naruto's side, against 4 of the strongest Missing Nins in existence, the tension in the air grew as time slowly ticked by. With all the introductions over and done with, there really was only one thing left to do – to fight.

Slowly taking this time to gather himself and swallowing a solid pill that Seiko had so kindly given him, Naruto found himself in the centre of a standstill. However, unlike the time when he was still back in the Hidden Air Village, he no longer felt inferior to all his peers, especially those that surround him today. He no longer felt weak when compared to them, and most of all, he no longer feared to lose their acceptance or respect. He was the Uzumaki heir, it is his responsibility to rule Kuunoki in the future, and though he does not wish to do so, he refused to shy away from his duties. This situation just turned out to be the first and best practice run he could use before the real thing.

"Jubei. You fight against Itachi." Naruto firmly ordered. Though he had never really taken a formal leadership role before in his entire life, after his experience within team 7 as well as how he was forced to take control of the situation only hours earlier, Naruto felt confident enough that his decision was the correct path to take. He knew that Jubei was the strongest out of all 10 Gate Guardians at the moment, and would definitely have the best chance at defeating the Uchiha prodigy.

Hearing screams in the distance, Naruto directed his gaze at the remaining snake summons that were still ravaging Konoha even as he speaks. "Akiko! Take care of those blasted snakes before fighting against Deidara."

Gaining more and more confidence in his orders and the logic of his thought patterns, Naruto continued to give out commands to the 10 Gate Guardians. He wasn't afraid of them anymore, and more

importantly, they were here to protect him. As the Uzumaki heir, it is their duty to follow his orders. And not only that, this could be the major turn of event that Konoha has been waiting for. Naruto would not lose this chance to defeat both the Akatsuki and Orochimaru. Anything or anyone threatening his home (Konoha) would be dealt with in the most brutal way possible. And he wasn't going to let this chance go to waste, even if it meant calling in the cavalry from Kuunoki.

"Yami, you're opponent is Sasori of the Red Sand. Mishizu, you're fighting against Kisame. Seiko! Take care of Kabuto (the Dokudes Half breed) and Orochimaru. Katana and Tori secure the Northern borders; don't let any more Sound Ninjas invade Konoha! Hikari and Koushiro secure the Western Borders and take care of any other invaders within Konoha. Maya! You stay with me!"

A loud chorus of "Hai, Naruto-sama!" and instantly, everyone leapt into action. Maya took a strong hold of Naruto himself before both jumped away from the scene, heading in the opposite direction of where everyone else scattered.

It wasn't that Naruto didn't want to fight but even he knew that he shouldn't continue to push himself while he was still recovering, not just from Chakra exhaustion but also from the massive use of the Yochigan. Due to this state of vulnerability, Naruto had no choice but to keep at least one of the 10 Guardians by his side. However, he was glad that Maya was the one to accompany him; she had always been more of a defensive and back-up fighter than the rest of the group, making her the best choice to protect him out of all of them.

Jubei had used his teleportation rings to ambush Itachi and before the Uchiha prodigy knew what was happening, they were both stranded some where far away in the surrounding forest of Konoha, at least a few kilometres away from the central village hub.

Kisame and Mishizu had leapt away, running towards the largest mass of water within the Leaf village – the man-made canal (11).

Akiko had gleefully yelled at Deidara to "hold on for a second" before pulling the massive boomerang off her back, taking aim and swinging it with all her force. The giant Boomerang sped through the air in the general direction of the three remaining snakes. Once it had reached its destination, it suddenly started glowing an unnatural aqua (blue-green) colour. With its surface still glowing, the boomerang seemingly sliced through all three snake's neck with an easy arc, simultaneously destroying the remaining snake summons in one single breath. It was a magnificent and yet terrifying sight.

Akiko just grinned happily all through out the procession before she finally lifted her arm up in a slight gesture just in time to grab hold of the returning Boomerang. "Now, we can begin. Thank you for waiting, ne!" She yelled in cheerfulness, completely unaware of the fear and awe she struck in many of the Leaf and Sound Shinobis in this battle that had witnessed what she did.

"This will certainly be fun. Mn." Deidara grunted before mentally ordering his giant clay bird to fly higher still.

Akiko, not to be outdone, simply dropped her boomerang onto the ground. Once it had landed haphazardly onto the flat earth, she stepped confidently on top of it. "Rise." She commanded in her most serious tone of voice this entire day (of which still sounded as if it had more amusement and cheer than a usual serious command). As if heeding its master's orders, the horizontal boomerang suddenly started rising into the air, pushed up by a concentration of air particles and wind force. "Two can play this game, Deidara of Iwagakure (Stone Village)." And with that said, Akiko, standing nonchalantly on her boomerang flew to pursuit her prey, Deidara of the Akatsuki.

When the orders were given, Katana had instantly run off towards the Northern front of Konoha, his blood already boiling in eagerness to fight, to kill, to slaughter. Without acknowledging his best friend's cry (Tori), Katana efficiently and quietly leaped onto the destroyed rooftops of many Konoha buildings, killing any invader Shinobi that stood in his way by slicing them into multiple pieces even before they could blink. Katana wasn't known as the fastest warrior in all of Kuunoki for nothing.

Tori, having been abandoned by his friend – Katana, due to the fact that he was obviously slower than Katana, decided to cheat a little in catching up with his friend. "Wait for me! Katana!" Tori yelled, even while he clapped his hands together and slammed it back down onto the ground. In that instant, Tori had made a pact with the Earth itself, it would assist him in whatever he endeavoured and in return he would use his Chakra to heal the earth itself. The Kataichi family has always had an affiliation with mother earth and as such, many people within the Kuunoki considered them to be nature's warriors. But even as Nature's warriors, they were powerful, especially when they had the aid of the very Earth itself.

With a sudden grumbling sound from the underneath the ground, a giant stone hand rose from the ground underneath Tori, lifting the boy up even while the rest of the Earth golem revealed itself to all bystanders. "That way! Pet! That way!" Tori cheerfully pointed in the direction that Katana had ran off to, and his 'pet', the Earth golem instinctively followed the little boy's orders. Giant feet stepped carefully forward, treading around Shinobis belonging to Konoha and unceremoniously stepping on Shinobis that invaded Konoha. How the earth golem would recognise who belonged to where, even Tori didn't know and didn't really care to know. It was all part of the intricacies that is mother Earth.

When Katana had leapt off towards the Northern borders of Konoha, both Hikari and her twin brother, Koushiro, too, had leapt towards the

Western front of the Leaf village. They were in no real hurry to get there as Katana was, but simultaneously, they were taking their time to kill off any enemy ninja that they saw. It was easy pickings for the Lightning twins as all they had to do was shock the enemies with a high voltage pass, and instantly, their opponents would be dead, bodies completely fried.

Seiko could feel her fury and confused jumble of emotion struggling against each other from within her heart. Naruto-sama had ordered her to take care of Yakushi Kabuto (the Dokudes half breed) using whatever means necessary. And if this half-breed proved himself to be too much trouble, well, it was her duty to kill him. But... but he was her cousin after all, even if he didn't know it. Their mothers had been sisters, even though the previous generation didn't really get along very well. Her own mother had been the clan leader as well as a Gate Guardian. It was by her mother's hand that Kabuto's mother was killed. Now, it was her turn to finish what her mother didn't, to kill off all threads of her Aunt's betrayal.

Half-breed or not, Seiko knew she could never forgive Kabuto for working with that sleazy snake Summoner – Orochimaru, but at the same time, she had never killed one of her own before. She had never been forced to kill another Dokudes. This indecision plagued her from the moment she was told by the Lady Oracle that she would have unfinished business to deal with and was given the permission to deal with it as she sees fit. And now, it was all Seiko's decision whether Yakushi Kabuto lives or dies, whether her cousin deserved to live like a living member of the Dokudes clan, or die like his mother, a traitor and escapee from Kuunoki.

While the other three Akatsuki members had disappeared to where their new battle grounds were, Sasori of the Red Sands opted to stay exactly where he was. There was no point for him to go anywhere. Why should he, he could fight here just as easily as he could fight anywhere. And really, it was just too bothersome for him to move.

Before him, Yami looked on with an impassive expression on his face. That is, until the boy finally spoke. "Sasori of the Red Sands, are you going to reveal your true self or are you going to continue to hide behind that puppet's body?"

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx (Itachi Vs Jubei)

Itachi stared impassively at Jubei for several seconds. Both hadn't moved a single inch since the moment they had been transported to this new area of battlefield, some kilometres away from the Hidden Leaf Village centre. It was as if both combatants were at a standstill even before they physically fought. Finally, Itachi decided to break the tension, eyes narrowing at the gently smiling visage of his opponent.

"Why are you here, Dokudes Jubei? You would be the last person to defend the Leaf. Like myself, you also have a grudge against this village." Itachi calmly stated, eyes curious but never fully demanding.

Jubei gave off a musical laugh in response, as if taunting Itachi's curiosity. After some seconds of chuckling, the light, violet haired teen finally settled down enough to answer Itachi's inquiry. "My, my. Why so curious all of a sudden, Itachi-kun? And why so formal? After all, to the Kuunoki, you are considered one of our kin, being the disciple of her highness, Yuuki-hime herself. You don't have to address me so formally, just Jubei or Jubei-kun will do." The young man rambled without ever truly answering Itachi's original question.

Itachi's eyes narrowed even further. "Are you jealous? I heard from Yuuki-... hime that you were going to be her disciple when you grew up more. Was it because she only taught me? Is that why you're here? For revenge?" Itachi continued to taunt back.

On the other hand, Jubei simply chuckled heartily again at Itachi's insinuation and accusation. "Oh. Is that what you truly think, Itachi-kun? It may be true that I had been promised to become Yuuki-sama's apprentice at one point in time, but after she didn't return.

Well..." He shrugged nonchalantly. "I was transferred into the care of Kaga-san, the only living Shadow master left." Jubei concluded with an icy gaze in his eyes while the smile never left his passive face.

Itachi tensed at this pronunciation. Neither he nor any of the Akatsuki members knew that Kaga had taken any apprentices. No one had imagined that the last Shadow Master would risk his family's techniques on outsiders. And since Kaga had never gotten married nor had any children, many had simply assumed that he wish to bring his bloodline to the death with him. This was why all had been surprised when that Nara boy was able to perform the Kageho (Shadow Walk) (12) technique. By all rights, the Jutsu belonged to Kaga and only Kaga himself.

The last shadow master was the only person in the world known for instantaneous transportation and transmutation (13) of shadows. And now, that Nara boy was able to perform one of his most famous transportation jutsu know to the shinobi world. This also explained (in Itachi's mind) how Jubei was able to transmute his rings into whatever shape or size he wanted it to become, as well as use it like a transportation instrument.

It suddenly dawned on the Uchiha prodigy that this person may be the challenge that he had been looking for since the night his parents (and the rest of his clan) had died. Ever since that moment of triumph, Itachi had been left feeling as if there was no one left to challenge him, no one who was of equal standing to his power but now... This was part of the reason why he had left Sasuke alive, so that the boy would grow powerful in the future and challenge him. It was also another reason why he had joined Akatsuki in the first place. For the thrill, the excitement, the adrenaline rush of battling against powerful foes; this was what made Itachi feel truly alive, in the midst of a battlefield. And now, standing in front of him nonchalantly may be the most challenging opponent he has yet to face. Itachi couldn't wait.

"Enough babbling. Let's fight." With this response from Itachi's monotone voice, the battle began. Finishing off some lightning quick

hand seals, Itachi released several, small fireballs flying at Jubei at high speeds. "Katon: Housenka no Jutsu! (Fire Element: Fire Flower Technique!)"

Jubei didn't move a single step to dodge the flaming projectiles. Instead, several golden rings quickly left his body (from his fingers, wrists, neck and so forth) to form a sort of barrier between him and the oncoming assaults. And when the fireballs finally impacted against the central part of the rings, they suddenly disappeared without a trace, leaving Jubei completely unharmed.

Sensing an attack coming from his right, Itachi quickly dodged. Landing in a safe place, he looked back in time to see that somehow, his own attack (the Fire Flower Technique) were somehow transported to a direction behind him via the suddenly appeared rings that now floated above the ground (directly behind where he had been standing only minutes ago). The fire itself had fizzled away, leaving only the revealed shuriken stabbing off the ground where it had landed haphazardly.

/ I see. The rings act like multiple transportation devices. When something travels into one of the rings, they reappear from another ring. So any projectile thrown at him, he'll just use his rings to throw it back at his opponent. And the rings can resize themselves into whatever shape or size he wish them to be... This is an incredible ability – an absolute defence in its own right. Nothing can get close to him. / Itachi thought to himself as he analysed the results of his first attack.

Trying his luck again, Itachi quickly performed another jutsu, this time, aiming it directly at the violet haired teen with an intense Chakra concentration, hoping to force the rings to break under the pressure. "Katon! Gokakyuu no Jutsu! (Fire Element: Grand Fireball Technique!)" The giant ball of concentrated flames flew towards Jubei, burning and blasting anything that stood in its way.

Jubei continued to smile, not moving an inch while watching the approaching flame asteroid with nonchalance and ease. As if by a

silent command, a golden suddenly appeared in between its master and the approaching attack, enlarging itself until it was at least 3 metres long in diameter before starting to turn in a clockwise direction. The ring spun around so fast that it created a slight wind tunnel, sucking everything into its centre, including the rapidly approaching giant fireball. As quickly as the fireball was created, it (and its power) was quickly absorbed into the centre of the ring, sucked right in like a vacuum.

As he watched the situation unfold, Itachi managed to narrow his Sharingan eyes in irritation before rapidly jumping up high in the air, just barely avoiding the massive force of flames and fire spurt forth from another ring that had suddenly appeared behind him. Landing some distances away, Itachi stood up tall before contemplating his next move.

/ Hm. Weapons and other projectiles are useless against him. Ninjutsu doesn't seem to work on him either. So now, I only have either Genjutsu or Taijutsu left. / Itachi thought to himself, further deciphering any weaknesses he can detect with his Sharingan eyes. To the Uchiha prodigy, it was truly amazing watching how the concentration of chakra could manipulate the molecular particles that make up the golden rings in the first place.

During its small size, the rings are made up of very tight-nit, compacted molecular particles squashed together to create a metallic substance that is incredibly hard. This coupled with the continually flowing chakra in between the particles holding them together makes the entire substance one of the hardest (if not the hardest) substance in the world. However, when the rings are enlarged or stretched across a large distance, the space between molecular particles is all spread out. At the same time however, the amount of Chakra flowing continuously within the rings remain the same, never losing any intensity due to time or the shift in structure.

Overall, Itachi's conclusion on the rings as a weapon of choice is highly impressive. But what's even more impressive is that Jubei doesn't have to physically touch the rings to control them. In most

instances, one would assume Jubei to be some kind of puppeteer (like Sasori), using Chakra lines to control a weapon of some sort. But in Jubei's case, it's completely different. Due to the enhanced skill in Chakra manipulation (without the use of touch) learnt by all Air Shinobis, they don't need that particular skill. With a concentrated mind or a sudden release of a silent pulse (air pulse or wavelength), they are able to communicate and control any weapon they so choose to the absolute maximum efficiency. It was amazing and at the same time, it makes the Air Nins one of the most dangerous people to fight.

/ Looks like I don't have much of a choice. / Creating a single hand seal, Itachi slowly lowered his right hand before minutely pointing his index finger towards Jubei's direction. With the stage set finally, the surrounding forest around the two combatants suddenly simmered away, revealing a catacomb of rugged stonewalls and fire lit in certain areas, highlighting the surrounding surface of walls and earth close to the light, but shadowing everything else. Itachi was just about to make his move when Jubei emitted a quite chuckle from his side of the tomb like structure.

"Ne. Ne? Itachi-kun. Do you really think an Air ninja would fall into such a simple Genjutsu? Do you truly think Genjutsu even affects us?" Another quiet chuckle accompanied the first, instantly decreasing the temperature in the room to several degrees below room temperature.

Itachi narrowed his eyes further and contemplated Jubei's expression as well as his previous reply. */ Genjutsu are advance intellectual Ninjutsu, which controls the chakra flow within the cerebral nervous system of a opponent by attacking one or more of the person's five senses.(14) However, if the opponent themselves have perfect Chakra control of their own body and mind, they can easily disrupt the control that I set up with the Genjutsu technique. In effect, it would be rendered useless and would probably backfire on me more than anything else. /*

After a few seconds of thought, the illusion of the catacomb slowly disappeared, leaving behind the original forest environment that had surrounded them in the first place. Curious, Itachi voiced a question that had been plaguing his mind for some time now. "Are all Air nins immune to Genjutsu?"

Jubei shrugged with childish disinterest, gentle smile never leaving his face. "Yeah. We are. It's a bit hard to invade the minds of people who already have their mind controlled by the 7 councillors. Even your Mangekyo Sharingan doesn't stand a chance against the mind controlling abilities of the 7 (15)."

"Hm. I see." Itachi stated monotonously as he lifted his right hand towards his face. Gripping the sides on his Akatsuki jacket loosely, he slowly but surely pulled open the buttons holding the sides of the jacket together, revealing the netted black shirt he wore underneath. Once all the buttons were undone, the heavy Akatsuki cloak instantly fell downwards due to the pull of gravity. With the cloak gone, Itachi's internal assemble is completely revealed. The netted collar black shirt was folded into a white cloth wrapped around the waist followed by slightly-baggy black pants folded into white and black Ninja boots / sandals.

Free of the pesky big cloak, Itachi reached onto his back and unsheathed his old but still incredibly sharp ANBU sword – the same sword he had used to stab his own parents and the rest of the Uchiha clan. Aiming the sword's tip directly towards Jubei, Itachi took up a formal Taijutsu stance, ready and waiting to attack.

Jubei's smile turned into a smirk at Itachi's movements. He chuckled in cynical humour. "Itachi-san. Do you really want to challenge me in hand-to-hand combat? You do know that though I'm only a half-breed, I am still a Dokudes by blood. Or have you forgotten the blood abilities of a Dokudes?"

"I haven't forgotten. The Dokudes clan are deadly in hand to hand combat, simply because a single touch from their palms or any part of their body will eventually render their opponent dead. Due their

special bloodline ability and affinity to poisons, anything that is within close enough range automatically becomes their target – a target for death." Itachi answered calmly, knowing exactly what he is doing.

"And you still want to challenge me in a Taijutsu only fight?" Jubei taunted back, readying his own stance. He left around four rings to surrounding him in the air as a defensive parameter, while the rest of the rings that he had employed shrunk back in size until they all fitted onto his slender fingers (on both hands). Fisting his hands, the golden rings on his fingers glimmered in the sunlight, reinforcing his knuckles with chakra-condensed metal, hardening them even further.

"Yes. I want to know how much of a challenge you are." Itachi replied back in conclusion. With that said, all conversation between the two combatants halted, both ready and waiting for the next move.

In a blink of an eye, both had suddenly launched themselves at the other. Itachi swung his sword expertly, aiming to slice Jubei's head right off. Jubei had his floating rings react by blocking the sword, his fist flung forward towards Itachi's face. Itachi dodged the punch, dropped down to the ground and swung his legs around. Jubei jumped up, avoiding Itachi's legs before lifting his right fist aiming to slam down on Itachi with it. Back flipping, Itachi landed some distance away from Jubei when his fist impacted the ground causing a great rumble as he shattered the very earth underneath him (16).

/ He has Chakra enhanced strength. / Itachi concluded while he efficiently dodged another fist, a flying kick as well as a slicing ring in the air before launching into another assault using his sword. The backwards and forwards of this seemingly seamless tug-of-war continued on for a long while, leaving neither Itachi or Jubei in the clear advantage or disadvantage. Overall, both were tied at a very high standard of fighting, but even they noticed that the other didn't give it their all. They both knew that each combatant was holding something back, and both were wondering if this battle would ever truly end.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX (This part will be totally about Katana & Tori)

Within a few seconds of high speed running, Katana had already reached the fringes of Konoha village, leaving a trail of massacred and sliced up bodies behind as a sign of his strength. However, upon reaching the main battle fields where hundreds upon hundreds of (to him) obviously brainwashed civilians fighting with Sound forehead protectors strapped to their heads, Katana instantly sneered at the cowardly way the enemy had enslaved others to do his bidding. The situation just came way too close to what the 7 councillors had done almost 50 years ago - when an entire Kuunoki clan had been slaughtered by a young boy simply because the 7 had deigned the clan too difficult to handle and had mind-controlled their youngest descendant to deal out the carnage to his own clan. It brought back childhood nightmares in which his people feared for their very minds, souls and freedom. After all, if you're not in control of your own body, what right do you have to live?

Pulling his beloved sword out from each side by both his hands, Katana jumped right into the foray between the Sound and Leaf Nins, blocking attacks from both ends as the stupid Leaf Nins had no idea that he was on their side. If it wasn't for the fact that he knew Naruto-sama would be incredibly angry at him for killing supposed allies, Katana would have off-ed anyone who stood in his way, whether they be Leaf Nins, Sound Nins, Rain Nins or whatever. But with the threat of the Uzumaki Heir's fury hanging over his head, Katana would rather not risk it. As such, he was careful in his dodges and blocks of any Leaf attacks, while killing off the professional Sound Nins as he went along.

As for the Brainwashed civilians, it only took a forceful kick into one of the younger girl's stomach, before the girl suddenly turned greener in skin colour and abruptly vomited out a sludge like substance. It was then that Katana discovered the sludge like substance was alive and it was moving. Quickly slicing whatever the entity was, Katana deciphered it to be none other than a very small

snake. Looking back at the girl, he noticed that though unharmed, she was weak and unconscious.

Finally figuring out this way of combating their enemy, he yelled over at the Leaf Nins to follow his lead as he replaced his swords before punching and kicking his way into victory, forcing out snakes after snakes directly from the mouths of their host before stepping on them, killing the controlling creature in a single move. Though reluctant at first to follow the strange boy's lead as none of the Leaf Nins recognised him, but after watching his actual success at disposing the enemy with one strike, most started following his lead and motions, gaining a lot more success than they had previously.

Pausing after he had freed the last of the civilians in the near by surrounding area, Katana suddenly recognised the repetitive vibration of the ground underneath him as being caused by Tori's Stone Golem. That means that Tori has finally caught up to him. And just as Katana thought that, he heard a cheerful yell from said friend. "KATANA! Don't run so fast! Do you know how much of a hassle it was for poor 'Okita' to practically tiptoe all the way here, trying to avoid all the houses and Leaf Nins underneath! We even met a man as big as 'Okita' but he was really nice and left us alone when he realised we're good people!" Tori continued to ramble on about his adventures through the village of the Leaf, while Katana could only lift an eyebrow in curiosity.

"Okita? Who's that?" He asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion though he wasn't willing to show it yet.

Tori gave him a brilliant smile in return. "This Stone golem of course. What else would it be? I named him 'Okita'!"

Katana sneered in disgust. "What about Ran, or Edo, or Konkon, or any of the other stupid names you've given all your *other* golems? Aren't they the same anyway!"

Tori pouted cutely as a ten-year-old boy would. "No, depending on which earth I use, I create a different golem all the time! And since

this is Konoha earth, it's the first time that 'Okita' had come out. I thought you knew that, Katana!" He yelled out, rather annoyed that his best friend would make fun of his new creation.

Shrugging in slight irritation and looking at anyplace other than the boy within the Stone Golem's hand, Katana snorted. "Whatever. Just built the barrier already will you, and I'll handle everything from the outside."

"HAI!" Tori yelled cheerfully from atop his pet's hand. The stone creature slowly but surely lowered the boy until his master only had to jump down a distance of about 5 inches to reach the ground. Once the young boy was safely standing on his beloved earth, he looked up almost lovingly at his creation. "Otika! Go back and rest, okay! You've done well today for your first day! But I don't need you anymore!" He yelled cheerfully to the impassive stone structure. As if a silent command had been given, the giant stone humanoid statue slowly started to crumble into dust, rock and other sandy particles floating lightly onto the ground below.

Turning around to face his best friend, Tori enthusiastically punched his fist in the air. "Yosh! I'm ready when you are, Katana!"

Katana rolled his eyes in irritation. "About time." The sword wielding child then started running towards the outskirt forested area of Konoha, jumping over the crumbled walls that once guarded the inner city, running towards the outline of defence in which most of the more dangerous rouge and Sound Nins are located.

"OI! Kid! Get back here. It's dangerous out there, that's the first line of defence where the Jounins are killing off the enemy! You're not supposed to go out there! You'll die!" Genma shouted in caution towards the two new comers. Though he didn't know who they were and where they come from, but since the two had appeared, their side seems to be winning this war suddenly. And let's not forget the spectacle with the boomerang only moments ago. So for now, Genma would assume that these two were allies of Konoha and as such, should follow the same rules as other Konoha Shinobis.

Katana didn't even pause slightly at Genma's outburst, and Tori could only look back at the man with a pout on his face. "Don't worry, Mister. Katana likes being out there. He can take care of himself." Ignoring any further outburst from the rest of the surviving Leaf Nins (and there weren't that many to begin with), Tori took a calmly breath before clapping his hands together and slamming both open palms onto the ground behind him. "RISE!"

A deep rumbling vibration of the earth underneath Konoha shook the entire foundations of the village, and just as suddenly as the rumbling noise began, a huge wall started rising out of the earth, replacing the many parts of damaged wooden walls that originally surrounded Konoha. This new wall of earth and hard stone rose even higher than the original wall, completely cutting off those on the inside of Konoha village and those on the outside (17). All the Shinobis and civilians currently within the city found themselves enclosed completely with no way out at all.

"Now, Katana can have his fun without being interrupted, ne!" Tori shrugged as he rubbed some dirt off his pants, grinning brightly at those around him while they only stared back at him in shock. It isn't everyday you find someone with enough stamina and Chakra capacity to mould the very earth under your feet to create such a large wall, and especially from a child as young as the one standing before them. It was unheard of. And not only that, Genma could only imagine the precise Chakra control a person will need to manipulate and mould actual particles are sand, dirt and soil in order to form those types of stone creation. This was practically on par with what the first Hokage could do with his special tree-growing jutsu.

The Leaf Shinobi's awe were abruptly cut off however when suddenly, multiples screams could be heard from the other side of the earth wall where most of the Sound Nins are still situated and where most of the Leaf Jounins are fighting. These human screams continued to fill the air chilling the Leaf Nin's very bones, while Tori seem to remain completely unaffected by the unholy noise. In fact, he just shrugged and continued to smile as if it was just another

normal day in the park. "Wow. By the sound of it, it looks like Katana is having a lot of fun. Oh well, I don't like all those icky stuff, too much blood." He blinked innocently at Genma, while Genma's mouth simply hung open, his worn tooth pick falling down the side of his opened lip.

(End)

(1) Summary on my website. Want to know more about Jubei, go to my website and read.

(2) "Kazeha" translate to 'wind blade' in English. Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(3) "Raitei" translate to "Lightning Emperor" and "Koushiro" translate to something like 'son of light'. Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(4) "Raitei" translate to "Lightning Emperor" and "Hikari" translate to "light". Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(5) "Kaiba" translate to "sea horse". Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(6) "Yami" means 'dark'. Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(7) "Oniyoubu" means 'ghost summoner'. Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(8) "Katana" means "sword" or a type of sword. Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(9) "Kataichi" translate into something like "Hard Earth." Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(10) "Dokudes" translate into "poison handlers". Summary on OC, find it on my website.

(11) This was the same canal that Itachi and Kisame fought against Asuma, Kurenai, Kakashi and Gai in the Naruto Cannon series.

(12) For those of you who don't remember, this is an original jutsu first used in **Faith in Humanity** Chapter 16, where Shikamaru fought against Temari.

(13) "Transmutation." A word I copied from **Full Metal Alchemist** . It basically means the process in which a person changes the very properties of a material. It can be as simple as heating liquid water and turn it into gaseous form, or it can be as complex as collecting particles from the air and moulding the atoms together to form something completely different.

(14) Explanations coming from Naruto Cannon series, book 29, Chapter 259 where Jiraiya was explaining the differences to Naruto.

(15) As mentioned before, why the 7 councillors are so feared in the Kuunoki stems mainly from the fact that they can take over a person's mind and control their body as they wish.

(16) Think of what Tsunade is capable of when she fought against Kabuto.

(17) Inspired by **Full Metal Alchemist** when Izumi built that wall to stop the water from the over-flowing river from crushing the town.

So, there you have it. Next chapter, more fights and more descriptions about the OCs and their personality. I'll also be talking a bit about what happens to the other Naruto Characters but mostly, it'll be an action packed chapter. In fact, I think there'll be several action packed chapters coming up. Hope you all enjoy! And remember to review! I love reading comments from all of you.

By the way, if possible, I would like to inquiry if anyone is interested in beta-ing the up-coming chapters of **Restoration of Faith** . I've already got one (THANK YOU! BIG AZN DADDY!) but I'm been use to having two at the same time reviewing my work. And somehow,

I've lost contact with KageNaruto after he changed his email address. So if anyone is interested, email me (shella "at symbol" iinet. net. Au) – without the spaces. Thanks!

War IV

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Fourteen: War IV – 10 Gate Guardians II!

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: (Continue on with the last chapter) A lot of violence... and a lot of jump scenes. Hope you get use to it. This Chapter (like the previous Chapters) will mainly be about the new OCs. I will need all of you people to be patient and slowly absorb each of these characters into the plot.

For those of you who HAVEN'T gone to my website, you will have to now. To look at the images of the 10 OCs described, please go to my website (address is at my profile's page), in the Faith Gallery section, there is a page dedicated to all 10.

The Chapter is separated into several segments: 1) Kisame Vs Mishizu, 2) Koushiro and Hikari, 3) Seiko Vs Sound and 4) Naruto and Maya.

Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 14

(Kisame Vs Mishizu)

"Shall we begin then?" Kisame smirked at the young female Air Nin standing before him. Her silky blue hair floated in the breeze even while her army hat did its best to hold it in place. Both combatants stood stiffly atop the harmonious flow of the canal's water surface. Kisame, holding on to the Samehade over his shoulder in a slight forward slouch and Mishizu standing straight, all the while gazing forward.

Without any noticeable signal for them to begin, both combatants jumped into their attacks. Throwing his precious Samehade into the air, Kisame performed his own set of jutsu. "Suiton: Suikoudan no Jutsu! (Water Element: Water Shark Splurge)" From the surrounding water, Kisame created a giant shark-like form. The great white shape seamlessly sliced through its aquatic environment heading towards the still Air Nin.

Mishizu, noticing the approaching shark quickly launched into her own set of seals. At the last possible moment, when the great white shark launched itself out of the water, ready to bite into the girl, she completed her jutsu. "Suiton: Suijinheki no Jutsu! (Water Element: Water Barrier Jutsu)" A giant wall of water suddenly rose up to block the great white shark, the smashing of water particle against water particle was so powerful in force that that both jutsus were destroyed simultaneously.

"Eh? A water specialist, are you? I didn't think the Kuunoki had any elemental users other than air." Kisame sneered in hidden surprise, nonchalantly catching the falling Samehade in his right hand.

The blue haired girl snorted and narrowed her eyes further. "It just goes to show how little you know about the Kuunoki." Mishizu snapped back in a cold, unfeeling voice.

"Oi. Arrogant much!" Kisame snorted in irritation.

"Not arrogant, just cold." With that said, Mishizu reached behind her back and pulled out a very short dagger from her belt that was made up of a strange blue crystal instead of a metallic blade.

Kisame's eyes widened at the newly revealed weapon. "WHERE DID YOU GET THAT, BRAT?" He yelled in a sudden fury, completely focused on the weapon and glaring hotly at its current wielder.

"A family heirloom, passed down to me by my uncle, Shinji Kaiba." Mishizu murmured calmly, never flinching from the glare sent at her by Kisame.

Kisame's shark like eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You're Shinji's niece! I didn't even know he had any family left, after the Kaguya massacre..."

Mishizu shifted her gaze away slightly. "I wasn't there. My mother, Mizurin, married my father and returned to the Hidden Air when I was only a toddler. We didn't know about the deaths until several months after..."

"Hm, no wonder Shinji died protecting the current Mizukage. If he still had the Sui Shojin (Water Crystal God) (1) by his side, then there was no way he could have lost to anyone. After all, of the 7 Seven Great Swords created from the Hidden Mist Village, the Sui Shojin is the smallest and the strongest by far." Kisame murmured to himself before refocusing his attention onto the opponent standing before him.

Mishizu tilted her head to the side in slight surprise at Kisame's knowledge. "You seem to know a lot about the Sui Shojin."

Kisame smirked. "I'm not one of the 7 Seven Swordsmen of the Mist for nothing. Not only that, I was once a friend of Shinji's. If he hadn't of died, I might have even stayed back in the mist." Standing up in a straighter posture, Kisame's eyes glazed slightly in remembrance. "Hell, it was Shinji's death that sparked that riot after the civil war. He should have become the next Mizukage, not that pompous arrogant ass that currently runs the mist!" Kisame shouted in passion, reliving his old ideals that had died a long time ago.

Mishizu stilted in confusion. "My uncle was young." She stated in a calm fashion, as if that one comment explained everything in the world.

Kisame showed a sardonic smirk, glazed over slightly in sadness. "Heh. He would have been the first to admit he was young. But he was also strong, the strongest of us all. We needed him to hold us together. We needed him to lead..." Shaking his head as if to clear the thoughts, Kisame refocused on the fight that was taking place. "Well, it's all in the past now. Let's just leave it at that, little girl. Shall we continue with the fight or what?" (2)

This time, instead of throwing the Samehade into the air, Kisame dropped it nonchalantly into the water before launching into his next set of skills. "Kirigakure no Jutsu! (Hidden Mist Technique)" Within a few seconds, the entire canal area was covered over by a heavy, thick fog-like mist, obscuring any person's view as to what was happening.

Within the fog, Mishizu stood still, glancing from one area to the next without showing any sign of true fear. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the Samehade slashed into Mishizu's back, cutting her flesh deeply. Blood poured out of the deep wound as Kisame revealed himself behind the still form of now butchered girl. And just as suddenly as the attack happened, Mishizu's body evaporated into water left to splatter inelegantly onto the watery surface beneath their feet.

/ Mizu Bunshin? (Water Clone) I've been had! / Kisame quickly ducked a swiping blade of water particles as it slashed where his head had been moments before. Dropping into the water itself, Kisame quickly swam some distance away, knowing that as long as he was within the water environment, he was susceptible to any attack made by the Sui Shojin. Unfortunately for Kisame, he wasn't quite fast enough.

Either due to Kisame's slight slowness or his underestimation of Mishizu's true potential, Kisame was truly caught unaware when a hidden wave of underwater currents suddenly pushed him straight

up from his aquatic surroundings, pressing him through the water only to burst forth into the air, along with the torrents of water pushing him up. Like the birth of an underwater volcano, the surge of water shot Kisame high into the air before finally dispensing back to its watery grave.

Trapped high in the air, Kisame twisted his head around just in time to see Mishizu finish off a one handed seal. "Hyouten: Aishu Shin no Jutsu! (Ice Element: Ice Needle Technique) (3)" Just as Mishizu finished announcing her technique's name, hundreds of ice needles launched themselves out of the surrounding water, heading straight towards the falling Kisame from all directions.

Knowing that he didn't have time to prepare any jutsu, Kisame swung the Samehada quickly in an uncoordinated fashion around himself, breaking and destroying a few of the needles as they reached him but still unable to stop the entire barrage. By the time Kisame finally smashed into the water he truly thought that he had been rendered into a pincushion. Let's just say, he wasn't very amused.

While still under water, Kisame quickly launched into another set of seals in retaliation. / *Suiton! Bakushouha no Jutsu! (Aquatic Shockwave!)* / Above water, Mishizu stood unsteadily as a giant tidal wave of water suddenly erupted before her, heading straight towards her. She knew that Suijin Heki (Water Barrier) would be useless against such a powerful technique. That's why the only thing she did was ready her short sword, the Sui Shojin, for what ever Kisame would be throwing her way.

The tidal wave continued to rise in height until it towered a good 30 metres tall before tipping itself over and smashing downwards over Mishizu's body. Though strong in the use of water elemental jutsus, even Mishizu had to wince at the amount of pressure being smashed into her small form, leaving her disoriented as well as forcing her underwater where any of Kisame's attacks could be waiting for her.

And waiting, Kisame was. */ Goshoku Zame no Jutsu/ (Five Shark Feeding Frenzy)* From Kisame's finger tips, he summoned forth 5 large, great white sharks, all with their jaws open and ready to feast on the still slightly disorientated Mishizu.

Mishizu, opening her glazed eyes slightly, noticed the incoming sharks. Pulling the Sui Shojin closer to her chest and covering it with both her hands, she forced her mind to concentrate on pushing Chakra into the sword. "Fuuin Kai! Ryuuoh! (Seal Release! Dragon King!)" With a burst of underwater pressure, Mishizu released the seal on the true power of the Sui Shojin and awakened the Dragon spirit that dwelled within it.

The burst of Chakra and underwater pressure widened continuously in a tidal wave, instantly destroying the summoned sharks as he it passed through them as well as forcing Kisame to run away before he, was caught in the sudden impact from the spirit's release as well.

A giant roar in the atmosphere was the only warning given before the giant head of water dragon emerged from the canal, followed by its body, appendages and tail, draining half the amount of water that was originally in the canal. Hanging tightly onto its watery mane was none other than Mishizu, silently commanding the Dragon King not to pour a cyclonic rain onto the environment beneath but only to destroy the one man standing in her way.

"Shxt! These Kuunoki Nins really don't know any restraint do they!" Kisame swore as he stood on the fluctuating surface of the remaining water supply. */ I haven't seen that spirit since the last time I've actually had a serious fight with Shinji, and even then, Shinji would never use it so rashly! Who the hell is this girl? /* Kisame mentally cursed to himself.

Having no choice but to pull out the real big guns in such a situation, Kisame quickly formed a second clone of himself in order to help him finish the fight. "Mizu Bunshin. (Water Clone)" Though the clone contains only 10 percent of Kisame's original chakra capacity, due to Kisame's extremely high stamina, the clone was fairly powerful to

begin with, at least, as powerful as Kakashi any day. "Let's get this show on the road."

With that said, both the clone and the real Kisame launched into performing different sets of seals. The clone finished first. "Suiton Suiryuudan no Jutsu! (Water Element: Water Dragon Blast)" The clone shouted out as out of the remaining water supply, three long, slim water dragons burst forth. Flying through the air, the three small spirits somehow managed to twist and twirl themselves out of harms way by avoiding the snapping jaws of the bigger dragon spirit but with a tightening of the interconnections, Mishizu and her large dragon spirit found themselves entrapped by the three interlocking spirits. Suddenly, realising she was trapped, Mishizu tried to focus and think of a solution out of this dilemma, but the real Kisame didn't give her enough time to think, he had just finished his own jutsus.

"Suiton Daibakufu no Jutsu! (Water Element: Water Explosion Technique)" Every last drop of water from the canal was pulled into this one technique, creating a monstrous, cyclonic whirlpool rising upwards towards Mishizu and her dragon. The Dragon King spirit, as if realising the danger to its summoner, curled in to itself as best it could to protect its master a split second before the force of turbulent water reached them.

The impacting explosion was loud enough to sound like a volcano eruption and with its immediate dispersion, water rained down like a tropical rain storm. Both the Daibakufu no Jutsu (Water Explosion) and the Ryuuoh (Dragon King Spirit) had dispersed at the moment of impact, so, in this case, both Kisame and Mishizu had drawn a tie in battle. However, unlike Kisame, still standing safe and sound on the almost empty canal, Mishizu was falling from a very high altitude with very little Chakra in her system to sustain her fall.

Luckily or unluckily, depending on whose point of view you're with, in the last moments of her fall before she literary smashed herself onto the thin layer of water before the concrete canal grounds, Kisame used some of the last ounces of his Chakra to create a water prison

in order to protect, shield and cage her into a watery prison. "Suiton – Suirou no Jutsu. (Water Element – Water Prison Technique)"

Confused, tired and frazzled by slight Chakra exhaustion, Mishizu couldn't help but glare hatefully at Kisame for saving her life and yet imprisoning her at the same time. For her pride, she would have rather died than admitted defeat.

As for Kisame, if asked, he couldn't really tell you why he had saved her in the first place. If she had really slammed right onto the canal floor with nothing to break her fall, she really would have died. But in that moment of instinct, he did do something (that some would argue was honourable) to save her. After a moment's silence, Kisame could only grunt in irritation, having had enough of the young girl's glaring. "Ah! Shut up and stop looking at me like that. I'm just repaying the time Shinji saved my life, kid! Since he's dead and buried already, there no way I can repay him directly. Besides, if he really was the one to give you the Sui Shojin then he did it with the wish, that some day you'd become his legacy. And if that's the case, saving you would mean I'm no longer indebted to him, so enough of your glaring!"

With that said, Kisame unceremoniously dropped the jutsu, letting Mishizu drop exhaustedly onto the thin layer of water beneath her before turning around and stepping away. "Next time, show some more restraint and you may last longer, kid." Kisame grunted his advice without ever turning around and looking at the girl. (4)

Left behind by her lonesome self, Mishizu slowly but surely drifted off into unconsciousness, mentally berating herself for losing. Though admitting to herself that she had been fighting a superior warrior, her pride wouldn't let go of the fact that she had lost this fight. And she swore to herself that the next time they met, she would not lose. Not for her own pride, the pride of her family, and most of all, the pride of her late uncle.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx
(Hikari & Koushiro)

Koushiro slammed his fist into the covered face of a Sound Nin, sending in streams of electricity to fry the man's brain and rendering him dead. He had to quickly duck a swing from another opponent, followed by a kick to the enemy's chin as he did a back flip, breaking the opponent's jaw and dislocating his neck at the same time. Landing gracefully on the ground, Koushiro sneered haughtily at the enemy ninjas surrounding them. "This is too boring, Sis. Why don't we go all out?" He asked, starting to get irritated by these annoying ants for enemies.

Hikari rolled her eyes at her twin brother's whining. "We've got our orders, Kou. Naruto-sama specifically told us to take care of these simpletons and that's exactly what we'll do." She ordered in a firm, commanding voice. Slamming her opened palm right into someone's chest, she shocked the man with close to a thousand volts of electricity, instantly stopping the man's heart even while she pushed him away and out of her sight.

"Yeah... but, he never told what means to use. Instead of just using hand to hand combat all the time, why don't we take it a step up?" Koushiro continued to whine, even as he caught an incoming kunai, charged it with his own chakra and electricity before throwing it back and striking the original thrower in the head.

Hikari narrowed her eyes in suspicion while kicking another Shinobi right between his legs. Suffice to say, he went down like a bullet. She ignored his groan of pain as well as Koushiro's slightly hidden wince. "And what do you have in mind by 'a step up'?" She snorted confidently, glaring at the remaining Sound Nins but keeping her ears open to any of her brother's suggestions.

Koushiro gave her a sadistic smirk. "I wouldn't mind trying *that* jutsu. After all, Naruto-sama never specifically stated how much restraint we have to be. So why not go all out and hold no restraints whatsoever?" He continued to smirk, lifting his right hand up in the

sign of a gun, concentrating and then shooting out a small bolt of lightning, striking his intended opponent's heart, killing the man instantly.

Hikari's eyes grew wide in shock. " *THAT* jutsu! Isn't it going a bit too far? After all, this is Konoha! Naruto-sama would never forgive us if we destroyed Konoha just because you were itching to use *that* jutsu out!" Pulling her opened palms in front of her chest, she focused her chakra and soon, sparks and lines of lightning and electricity were formed, condensed within the area between her palms. When she was ready, she pushed her palms forward so that it faces the foes standing in front of her. Instantly, the collected bolts of electricity flew forward, directed towards any living creature, namely, the Sound Shinobis. With that one move, Hikari instantaneous killed up to eight Shinobi.

Koushiro glared at his sister's attempt at beating his record by using high-end jutsus. "That was cheating, Sis. Now, I'm up to 51 kills compared to your 49. I'm still in the lead." Pausing in his speech, Koushiro pulled both his hands together in front of his chest. His right forming a fist and his left covering it, infusing his right fist with chakra and an abundance of electrical power, Koushiro pulled both his hands back and his left leg in the stance of a baseball player, before suddenly launching forward and punching thin air. However, what the eyes cannot see is how he had released the condensed electrical surge just as he was punching forward. The invisible ball of lightning passed right through several enemies standing in a straight line (killing them straight away) before blasting a giant whole three metres wide in the area behind them.

"Oi! That's damaging Konoha property! Definitely not something Naruto-sama would be happy about!" Hikari quickly retorted back, annoyed at the sudden jump in numbers to be added to her brother's tally. And in a fit of fury, she too, released a similar bolt of lightning. This time, only larger, and aimed at bigger cluster of people, killing close to 18 casualties at one go and due to the cluster of bodies, no other property was damaged.

"Look! Why don't we go back to the original issue! I really want to try *that* jutsu! We were never really allowed to use it while still in Kuunoki and I need to practice in order to fully learn how to control it! You and I both know that practice makes perfect, and this is the perfect opportunity for us to do it! With this one jutsu, we could probably drive off both the Akatsuki and the Sound, I'm sure Naruto-sama would forgive us this time. After all, it was all done in the name of Konoha, right?" Koushiro ranted, partly angry that his sister had somehow beaten his score 83 to 75 with that last shot, and partly because he was getting tired of fighting with such restrictions.

No matter what the mission, no matter what the conditions, he had never really been given any restraints on the force or power he was allowed to use before. And now, in a new environment, forced to follow the orders of someone he had never really followed before, the uncertainty of whether whatever he did would truly infuriate Naruto or not was driving him up the wall. But he truly believed that the sooner they drive the enemy away, the happier Naruto-sama would be, instead of taking their time and maybe giving the enemy more time to do more damage.

Throwing a small tantrum, he flung another bolt at the enemy, but this time, they had become smarter – either that, or because there was simply less of them in the first place – but most of the targeted foes leapt away just in time to dodge the dangerous bolt, leaving Koushiro only killing 3 with that one attempt and infuriating him even further as his sister was still several kills above his own.

Hikari sighed and shook her head, completely understanding why her brother was really ticked off at the moment. Considering he actually missed his targets with the last attempt, he really must have been ticked off and not concentrating enough. It isn't normal for an Air Nin to miss if they really intended to hurt you. After all, with the precise Chakra control and manipulation skills taught to all Kuunoki Ninjas from a very young age, it was highly disturbing to have one's jutsus miss its intended target. "Fine. Whatever! But if he's going to

bite our heads off, it's all your fault!" She warned before refocusing on the lowering number of enemies confronting them.

"YEEHA! Finally, you see it my way! Alright! Let's do this! NO MORE RESTRAINTS!" Koushiro jumped up and punched his fist in the air in celebration. It wasn't often he won an argument with his sister. Most of the time, he just didn't feel bothered enough to continue the seamlessly unending squabbles, so he eventually admitted defeat gracefully, which infuriated his twin anyway.

"I'm beginning to think we never had any restraints to begin with!" Hikari murmured to herself, shaking her head in a resigning fashion. She knew that her brother – with his keen ears – had heard her but knew that they both would ignore the insult for the time being. After all, they had a powerful Jutsu to pull off.

The sudden rumbling sound startled the twins as they both (and the enemy) looked around in surprise, watching silently as a very high wall of earth burst forth from the ground, creating a protective barrier around Konoha to stop any invading Ninjas as well as caging those that were already within the walls.

"Well. It looks like Tori and Katana have finally started their stuff. Katana must be in his element." Koushiro smirked. He could just imagine the blood thirsty little boy running around chopping heads off with absolute glee. Hikari, on the other hand, grimaced at the mental image her brother shared with her through their psychic link.

Though rare, Hikari and Koushiro had been taught from a very young age that due to their condition of birth (as twins), with precise Chakra control and practice, they could actually form a psychic link with one another, communication on a mental level that cannot be obstructed or manipulated by anyone. Through many years of practice, they had perfected this form of communication but nowadays, they use it only to annoy the other simply because they knew that the other could not ignore the messages or images they sent. It wasn't that they couldn't block one another; it was just that they usually only used it in times of hardship and as such, and had

grown accustomed to listening when the other sent them something.
/ Now, it's just down right annoying. / Hikari thought to herself.

"Oi! Are we gonna start or what?" With a sweep of her hand, Hikari quickly killed off all the remaining enemies by release a constant surge of electricity, forming a whip-like form that targets any organisms larger than a dog. So in one fell sweep, she killed off any enemy within the near by area as well as boosting her count to over 105, almost 20 kills above her brother.

Suddenly, in another part of Konoha, a giant water dragon rose, roaring a terrifying sound. The twins watched in silent awe as the dragon was somehow subdued by three smaller dragons and then was destroyed completely by a following attack.

"Damn. I hope Mishizu is okay. But how I wish I was fighting her opponent right now! I wonder why Naruto-sama didn't send one of us against him. After all, a Lightning user is infinitely stronger than a water user, simply because of our clash of elements." Koushiro murmured to himself as he analysed the situation.

Hikari shrugged nonchalantly, but her eyes remained focused. "It doesn't matter what Naruto-sama's reasons are. We are simply to follow them. Let's start our own stunt." She commanded calmly, bringing their attention back to the situation at hand.

"Right you are!" Rubbing his hands together gleefully, Koushiro forgot about Mishizu's supposed dilemma almost immediately. "Let's get started. You start doing your sparkly thingy, and I'll start summoning Raiten Ryuu! (Lightning Sky Dragon) (5)"

Hikari glared at her brother. "IT'S NOT CALLED SPARKLY THINGY! It's the Hikari no Gen'ei! (Illusion of light) (6) Get it right the first time, damn it!" She said waving her hands furiously at her twin who only shrugged and rolled his eyes in reply.

"Whatever! Let's start already!" Dropping on to his butt right on the floor, Koushiro glared at his sister to begin the preparations. This

was going to take some time and if there was something they didn't have at the moment, it was time.

Following in her brother's footsteps, Hikari too, gracefully dropped onto the ground and crossed her legs into a meditative position. Facing her brother, Hikari placed both her hands in front of her, one palm on top of the other. Softly, she started whispering the words of the jutsu she was about to perform and Koushiro watched in silent awe.

Though he would never admit it to his sister, he was truly amazed by his sister's ability to just sit there for hours on end and perform the same jutsu over and over again until she got it right. He definitely didn't have that kind of patience. Though twins and they had grown up together all their lives, both Koushiro and Hikari would admit that they have completely opposite personalities. If it weren't for the competitive streak between them, their similar looks and tastes in clothes (though really, their fashion sense was a direct result of their mother and didn't give them much choice in what they wore), it was hard to tell that they were twins in the first place.

What was even more amazing was Hikari's ability to manifest intricate illusions that – for a time – truly existed in reality. It was like breathing life into imaginary creatures, bringing to life whatever the user thought of. Using only light, Hikari has the ability to mold the light particles into real entities using her Chakra – this was her greatest gift. In this case, the only limit to her ability was limits of her imagination.

As for Koushiro, he preferred the direct path of fighting. Until his sister was completely in her trance and in full control of the environment, he would not feel safe enough to start his own chanting and summoning of the great Sky Dragon. It was an unofficial rule between the two. When using their best attacks, one would go first while the other watched his/her back, and then, the roles would be reversed. In this case, because Koushiro would be dealing out the final blow, it was his job to watch over Hikari as she went first.

Overall, Koushiro was feeling very excited at the prospect of calling forth his greatest jutsu again. He had only used it twice before and was looking forward to trying it out. However, he did hope that he wasn't making a mistake. If anything did go wrong, he was sure Naruto-sama would not be please. And an angry Naruto-sama would lead to an angry Ruri-sama and Kaga-sama, which could mean the end of his career if not his life. His shoulders slumped in depression at the thought but Koushiro quickly shook the images away, willing himself to concentrate on the here and now. */ I don't have time to be distracted. Ruri-sama had faith in us to send us all here to help. And Naruto-sama had faith in me to take care of the enemy. I won't let them down. /* He thought to himself resolutely.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx
(Seiko Vs Orochimaru/Kabuto)

Kabuto landed haphazardly atop Manda's scaly backside taking precious seconds to stabilise himself with chakra infused feet, upon his back he carried the unconscious Kimimaro. His arms were aching as they had just recently healed from almost been punctured off by Kakashi's Chidori. However, healing them back into place had literally taken all of Kabuto's strength. Not to mention, finding the Kaguya prodigy – Kimimaro – unconscious and laying on the ground, Kabuto couldn't have let one of their strongest warriors rot in death. With all his remaining strength, Kabuto had taken Kimimaro's unmoving body and quickly returned to Orochimaru's side. The sight that met him wasn't a very welcoming sight at all.

A huge part of the Konoha forest had been wiped out. It seems that Manda – having fought against two other Sannins and their summons – had been forced back out of Konoha's border and into the surrounding forests. However, it was clearly seen that all three summons and their summoners were on the last of their Chakra reserves.

Jiraiya was bent over his body, one arm lying limp as if it had been broken and the other hand holding tightly onto the side of his chest,

probably holding in place a few broken ribs. Tsunade wasn't fairing much better either. Though no visible wounds were on her body, her clothes were littered with bloodstains and was wheezing slightly in exhaustion. However, Orochimaru wasn't looking too good either, his face was bloody and burnt, his right arm was crooked looking as if someone had a bit too much fun twisting the bones within into a jigsaw puzzle. If this look had been on Kimimaro, all would have been well, but looking at Orochimaru, Kabuto knew that his master must have been in a lot of pain. However, before Kabuto could do much else, a new voice rang out between the battle of the three Sannins, interrupting everyone's thoughts and bringing all their attention upon itself.

It was a young girl, of possible 9 or 10 years of age. Her short dark blue hair drifted in the breeze even while her piercing violet eyes gazed unflinchingly at Kabuto's position.

/ Shxt! Did the Lady send them? Is that what those huge explosions in the distance meant? Crap! This is going to be messy! / Jiraiya thought to himself even while he grimaced when he recognised the girl. Glancing towards Tsunade (who had a frown of curiosity on her face), Jiraiya answered the silent question for her. "She's Dokudes Seiko, the heir to the Dokudes clan."

Tsunade's eyes turned inward slightly at the recognition of the name. */ Dokudes. It's been ages since I've last met a Dokudes. Rika-sensei, do they still sneer your name, even in death, will you ever have peace? Have they changed or are they still so arrogant in nature that they look down upon all half breeds and outsiders? /* Shaking her head, Tsunade rid herself on these sad thoughts. */ Times change, and with it, so do our culture and thinking. Hopefully, the Dokudes too will have changed for the better. I can only hope. /*

/ Who the hell is that brat! / Orochimaru lifted a delicate eyebrow in curiosity and slight nervousness.

Seiko confidently pointed a finger at her target – Yakushi Kabuto. "You, who was born outside of the Kuunoki. You, who was born of

the tainted blood of the Dokudes. It is my duty, as the heir to the Dokudes Clan, to purify your existence by sentencing you to death." She took up a formal stance before launching herself up into the air, directly towards where Kabuto stood stiffly on top of Manda's head.

"Heh. Like I'm afraid of a little girl? You won't even make a good enough snack!" Manda roared as he opened his mouth wide in order to gulp down the small girl.

Instantly recognising the name of 'Dokudes', Orochimaru quickly called out for caution but was too late to stop Manda's actions. "No! Manda! Do not get close to her!"

Pulling a small vial of dark, indigo liquid from her vest, Seiko pulled the rubber stopper off the tip of it before throwing it away with all her strength towards Manda's opened mouth (7). An instant later, the small bottle of unknown liquid emitted a strange smell - the smell of burning flesh before it suddenly erupted into a massive explosion. Black clouds of poisonous gases engulfed Manda's entire face and travelled down its body. Orochimaru and Kabuto (still with Kimimaro on his back) escaped just in time to avoid the dangerous chemical within the coloured smoke.

The acidic qualities of the gaseous killer burnt the molten scales right off of Manda's face, its features no longer recognisable as the flesh slowly but surely melted away leaving bone and ligaments to bleed uncontrollably. The rest of Manda's originally long and graceful body shifted in colour tone from its once vibrant purple to a dead and rotting blue. Scaly skin peeled off the very flesh and exposed it to the dying sun, the putrid smell of decaying meat, tissues and muscles filled the air even as all three Sannins stared in terrifying awe at the sheer power a small veil of Dokudes poison was truly capable of. The almost total decomposition of Manda's body had evaporated the giant's snakes' chakra and in the ensuing silence, Manda's body exploded into a large mass of white smoke, tainted by the noxious fumes of the previous poison, now quickly dispersing in the air.

After seeing the sheer destructive force the child could render to a summoning, both Gamabunta and Katsuya dispersed into smoke as well after warning their summoners of their retreat. After all, both did not want to become a target of the child's attacks, and with their sheer size and weight, it was easy for them to become a target.

Jiraiya and Tsunade too, had retreated as far back from the new battleground as they could. Jiraiya, from his experiences in the Kuunoki while he lived there for a time with Naruto, knew that if you stood in the way of what Seiko wanted to achieve, you better hope you die fast because that child could be a sadistic bxxxxh if she really wanted to be. And Tsunade just avoided the entire scene, keeping her calm from some distance away as she evaluated the strength of this young girl when compared to her late sensei's talents. Though hard as it was for her to admit it, Tsunade truly believed that in an offensive battle point of view, this girl could probably outstrip her and her late sensei in strength. However, from a medical Ninja's point of view, she probably still had more experience than this battle-loving child.

"That was just a taste of a pure-breed Dokudes's true power. The vial was originally filled with a special non-toxin, that when infused with the poisonic Chakra of a Dokudes, it could create an explosive reaction as the one you just witnessed." Seiko, after landing on a clean patch of land, calmly explained, intimidating her foes with her quiet and young voice, as if an innocent harbinger of death was at your doorstep asking you to kindly die.

Before Seiko could do anything else, a multitude of Sound Ninjas rushed into the clearing, obviously fearing for the safety of their leader's life. Seeing that all that's left is a small girl and two of the remaining Sannin, they all (of course) opted to go after the young girl instead, completely oblivious to the fact that she's probably more dangerous and unstable than the other two.

Narrowing her eyes in anger, Seiko pulled out another vial from her vest. This time, it had a strange orangey-red liquid within. Pulling the stopper off, Seiko confidently dropped the entire vial's contents right

into her throat, swallowing the unknown poison in one large gulp. Giving a sardonic smirk to her next victims, Seiko opened her mouth, took in a deep breath and blew forth a dark red and brown poisonous gas from her lips directly towards the incoming entourage of enemies.

The flames from this new attack sliced through the air like a finely tuned Karyuu Endan (Fire Dragon Napalm) and the intense heat emitted didn't just melt off flesh and bone; anyone who even breathed a scent of this toxic incantation will also start to feel the affects. For those Sound Ninjas that had somehow dodged and avoided the first volley of Seiko's burst of flames, they suddenly found their skin itching with dark, violet marks appearing everywhere. Wherever those unnatural marks resided, it started burning with an inner heat that literally ate away at the Ninja's own bodies from the inside out. Their screams of horror and pain filled the air as one after another, the Sound Nins that had once stood in Seiko's path wilted and died from internal consumption of a bacteria that were known for absorbing the tissues of a living animal from the inside out.

Orochimaru, though holding tightly onto his calm and confident visage on the outside, was trembling in frightening awe mentally. This was the first time he had ever witnessed the true fighting abilities of a Kuunoki Ninja, let alone one of the most powerful of the Dokudes tribe. He had prided himself in learning as much as he could about the illusive Dokudes clan – this was one of the reasons why he had hired so many of their deserters into his army.

They were all wonderful scientists and provided him with an endless supply of new ideas and inventions to boost his own Ninja's strengths. However, he had never seen any of them fight in a real battle before. All those who had worked for him were either weak in the offensive department to begin with or they were half-breeds or quater-breeds that showed very little talent when it came to the pure manipulation of properties in poisons.

And now, this mere child stood before him, showcasing one of the most terrifying performances he had ever witnessed in a Ninja battle, and from him, this was a compliment. How he wished he could capture and use her body as his next host. With that kind of fine tuned Chakra manipulation, techniques and the knowledge of poisons under his belt, he would truly be unstoppable.

However, before he would continue on with his fantasy of taking over all the most powerful bodies in the world, a loud rumble in the distance brought his attention away from the terrifying power of this girl. He looked towards the rising of a seemingly impenetrable stonewall that rose from the earth in order to surround the Leaf village in a protective barrier. A few seconds later, an animalistic roar filled the air as a giant water dragon rose even higher than the consuming wall.

Orochimaru watched the ensuing battles in silence, shocked at the sheer power that is needed in order to produce such affects. */ If this is the power of a single Kuunoki Ninja, what would it be like if I had an army of them? Is this the kind of power that Ruri has under her fist? Is this the true strength that Kuunoki holds over the rest of the world? Why is there such a big gap between our power? Why am I stuck with such weak excuses when she has such treasures! /* Fuming internally at the unfairness of it all, Orochimaru was then distracted by the large water explosion technique that rendered the giant water dragon dissipated. For the first time, Orochimaru also noticed in the distance, the familiar Chakra signatures of his once comrades, but of which, he had abandoned some time ago – the Akatsuki.

He could feel the familiar presence of Sasori of the Red Sands, Deidara, Hoshigaki Kisame and (to him, the most feared) Uchiha Itachi. The situation was turning for the worse in his case. He knew he was running out of people – his legions of mindless followers were practically useless as fighters and more in the form of zombies, and for those that did know how to fight, they couldn't compare with Konoha's own highly trained Shinobis and especially frightening

speed and power of the new arrivals – the Kuunoki Ninjas. Now seeing the sheer power being held by a single Kuunoki Nin, he was hesitant to push his luck and draw even more attention upon himself from the other Kuunoki Ninjas that are bound to have been sent by Ruri in order to help her heir apparent. For the first time since deciding to invade Konoha, Orochimaru was truly afraid that he had made a mistake.

Looking over at a nervous Kabuto and the unconscious form of Kimimaro – both arguably his best and most powerful Shinobis that he had, Orochimaru made a decision. Now that he knew of the extent in power difference. He would not rest until he had bridged that gap between Kuunoki and Oto (Sound). He finally understood why Kabuto and the rest of the Kuunoki deserters detested and feared the power of the Air. There simply wasn't any comparison. And now, he understood. He knew that to achieve his dream, he not only had to befall the Leaf, but he also had to conquer the Air. This was personal now. Decision finally made, all Orochimaru has to do now is find the chance to escape. Easier said than done when you have a seriously powerful foe standing in your way – namely the heir to the Dokudes Clan – Dokudes Seiko.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx
(Naruto & Maya)

The constant rumbling in the distance made Naruto feel edgy and nervous as he had ever been. Without the Yochigan, he's become just as uninformed as any normal person. Currently still struggling with Chakra exhaustion, Naruto found himself to be just short of a useless ninja and as such, the frustration of the entire situation is starting to wear him down.

Looking over at his quiet companion as they both stared out into the distance atop the Hokage's tower, Naruto had to quench his pride in order to ask the other for her opinion on the situation at hand. "So, what do you think is happening, Maya?"

Maya's calm pale green eyes gazed at her young master for a moment before shifting back to focus on the Leaf village as a whole. "Just as you have ordered, Naruto-sama. The others are fighting against their selected opponents." She answered quietly and almost shyly. It wasn't that she's exceptionally shy around Naruto, but she's shy around everyone. It isn't often for that an Oniyoubu to spoke, let alone have their thoughts presented in a verbal manner. Maya wasn't use to having attention focused on her.

Naruto sighed and rubbed his forehead in irritation, breathing deeply to calm his nerves. "I mean..." He said slowly and succinctly. "How are they doing now in their battles?"

Maya tensed slightly at the precise way Naruto had phrased his question. She knew he seemed to be angry with her for some reason, but she didn't understand why and this uncertainly was starting to make her uncomfortable. However, as a servant of the Uzumaki family, she had no choice but to answer to the best of her ability. "Jubei-san and Itachi-san are at a standstill at the moment. I can feel them both continuously testing each other and trying to find the other's weaknesses. Their spirits are strong and determined. It will be a while before anything truly dramatic happens between the two. They are both enjoying this fight too much to want it to end so soon." She answered as diplomatically as possible, already feeling nervous about hearing her own voice but she persevered.

"Mishizu-san's Chakra signature has all but disappeared after she released the Dragon King. She still isn't very use to using that technique and as such, her control over it is lacking. It isn't surprising that she lost using an experimental jutsu. However, her spirit – though unconscious – is still strong, I can feel that she is simply resting." Maya paused slightly to gather her breath. Speaking so much really is out of her habit but if this is what Naruto-sama needed to hear then she would try her best.

Naruto nodded at her explanation. Though curious as to why Kisame hadn't pushed his advantage, Naruto was still eternally grateful that Mishizu was safe and sound. He wasn't really close to many of the

current Gate Guardians per say but he would still feel guilty if one of them had died due to an order he had sent them on. Calm restored, he promised himself that after some rest, he would go and pick her up himself, just to make sure she stayed safe.

"Akiko-san seems to be having a lot of fun playing tag with Deidara-san. And so far, nothing important has happened between the two. Yami-nisama is still talking to Sasori-san at the moment (8). They haven't started their fight as yet. But I have faith in Yami-nisama and Akiko-san that they would pull through no matter what the circumstance." Coughing slightly to clear her throat, Maya continued with her progress report. Looking into the distance, she could vaguely feel all the spirits that filled the very air. And from analysing the power of these foreign and familiar spirits alike, she could pinpoint exactly what they were doing.

"Katana-kun and Tori-kun are enjoying themselves in the far distances of the Konoha border. They are both safe and unhurt. Koushiro-san and Hikari-san have just started using their most powerful jutsus. It won't be long before they unleash their power and force all the enemies to retreat or die. And Seiko-chan is currently battling off a few Sound Nins to get close to her target – Yakushi Kabuto. It seems that the Sound is preparing to leave at a single notice. With Koushiro-san and Hikari-san's final attack, they will all have to retreat or die." Maya finished her reporting and instantly went back to being quiet.

"I see. Arigato, Maya." Naruto commented, eyes never leaving the scene of destruction and endless fighting before him. "When the Sound starts retreating, secure the borders and start the healing and reconstruction process. I want the Leaf to go back to its original beauty as soon as humanly possible." He gave Maya his final orders for the night, knowing that she would complete it when the time is right. *I must have faith that everyone will pull through this okay. I have to.* He mentally consoled himself thinking about all the friends he had made in Konoha and about their fates which is all in their own hands at the moment. Silently, he prayed and hoped for their safety.

(End)

(1) Sui means 'water'. Sho (or 'jing' in Chinese) coupled with 'sui' creates 'crystal' and jin is a subset meaning for god (similar to "kami" or "shin"). Very complicated I know, but take my word for it; I looked it up on my Japanese Dictionary. (" ")

(2) Not only am I trying to breathe more life into my original characters, but I would also like to give more background and more history on the Akatsuki members. Mind you, these are all from my alternate universe so don't take it in reality but I really wanted to give these Akatsuki members some reason as to how they turned out the way they are. So, I hope you don't mind me letting them talk a bit more than usual, it just adds more into the plot. Not only that, I don't like creating bad guys that are completely evil, I don't believe in completely evil people unless they are completely psychopaths and I can't write about complete psychopaths.

(3) This was an original Jutsu that was first thought up in **Faith in Humanity**, Chapter , when Haku and Naruto debated on how they could exchange techniques. But after thinking over it a while, I decided to give it to Mishizu since the other two never actually used it before.

(4) Isn't Kisame nice, not killing her in cold blood? Don't ask me why I wrote that, it just kinda fitted at the time and I just left it as is.

(5) Original Jutsu, will be explained in later chapters. Rai means 'lightning', Ten means 'Sky', Ryuu means 'Dragon'; so Raiten Ryuu translate to something like Lightning Sky Dragon.

(6) Original Jutsu, will be explained in later chapters. Hikari means 'light', Gen'ei means 'illusion'; so Hikari no Gen'ei means something like Illusion of Light.

(7) Seiko's use of 'smelling' poisons was inspired by a character from **Get Backers** – Kimiko, who is also a poison handler (sort of) but not

to the extent that I had Seiko use it in this story.

(8) Maya refers to Yami as "Yami-nisama" because she really respects her cousin and it is usually him that pulls her out of awkward social situations in which she is being forced to speak or act outside of her norm.

Hope you guys liked this chapter as well, and I hope I'm not overwhelming you all with the number of OCs all of a sudden. I really tried to make them different and for you to instantly recognise them by the characteristics if not by their appearances.

I know from my own experiences when I read fanfics, I usually forget what OCs look like and imagine my their looks under my own influences, but what I really do want you all to remember is their 'character', their 'personality'. Each one of them is different and they would react to the same situation differently. I just hope that you would grow to like them as much as I have fell in love with creating them in the first place.

Anyway, I'm not going to apologise for the long wait, I think you've all heard it all before. It wasn't exactly a writer's block this time either, just being lazy and I had suffered from sickness for a few days – nothing too major, just the flu that knocked me to bed for a few day. Anyway, I'm going to start working on the next chapter – which should (hopefully) be the last chapter in the "WAR" semi-arc. After that, I have to focus on how Naruto will deal with his new friends (Leaf) and his old friends/supporters/servants (Air). Heh. It'll be interesting.

As always, please read and review. I love reading what you guys think about the characters and how the plot is progressing. I would also like to thank all those people who emailed me asking to be my beta-reader. I truly appreciate all your effort in helping me.

War V

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter Fifteen: War V – 10 Gate Guardians III!

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' , (FLASHBACK) , Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: (Continue on with the last chapter) A lot of violence... and a lot of jump scenes. Hope you get use to it. This Chapter (like the previous Chapters) will mainly be about the new OCs. I will need all of you people to be patient and slowly absorb each of these characters into the plot.

For those of you who HAVEN'T gone to my website, you will have to now. To look at the images of the 10 OCs described, please go to my website (address is at my profile's page), in the Faith Gallery section, there is a page dedicated to all 10.

The Chapter is separated into several segments: 1) Sasori Vs Yami, 2) Deidara Vs Akiko, 3) Koushiro and Hikari and 4) Itachi Vs Jubei.

Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 15

PREVIOUS CHAPTER

Before him, Yami looked on with an impassive expression on his face. That is, until the boy finally spoke. "Sasori of the Red Sands, are you going to reveal your true self or are you going to continue to hide behind that puppet's body?"

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx
(Yami Vs Sasori)

Sasori and Yami stared at each other in silence for a long period in time, both waiting for the other to break the ice. Finally, tired of waiting as patience was never one of his virtues, Sasori shifted slightly, his gaze never leaving the unblinking violet eyes of his opponent. "Well, since you already know that this isn't my true form, there really isn't any point in me still wearing it, eh?"

He remained still for a moment. Suddenly, a clicking sound could be heard though out the clearing, and then, slowly the giant wooden face upon his back lifted itself like a door being open from the inside out. Ever so slowly and gracefully, a small figure emerged from the once wooden mannequin laying flat on the dirty floor.

A petite, delicate looking hand appeared from under the long sleeve of the black gown the figure was wearing. These pale white hands reached up and pulled the hood of the black cloak down, revealing a very young face, the face of a child's. Short, shaggy looking blondish-brown hair (1) framed a young, fragile-looking face of a boy, but the pale face held very cold eyes – eyes of a merciless killer. "Well, let's start. I'm tired of waiting."

Dropping the black cloak that he once wore over his body, Sasori revealed another coat underneath – this time, it was the infamous Akatsuki coat, covered with the threatening colours of black, red and white outlines for the clouds – all giving an ominous and dangerous impression for a boy so young.

From the sleeves of his Akatsuki coat, the young Sasori pulled out a small scroll, opening it with his small fingers, the paper revealed a large character with the word 'three' on it. "I'll show you what I

brought along. Killing him for my collection gave me a hard time indeed." With that said, the summoning scroll suddenly burst into clouds of smoke. Once the haze has cleared, the once summoning scroll was replaced by a human size puppet with spiky black hair hanging down the puppets head and wearing a pure black cloak with spiked-looking features upon its collar. The gem like eyes upon the chiselled face of the puppet would haunt the nightmares of many Shinobi who had ever faced such a foe, but Yami didn't even blink, it was as if he had expected it all from the very beginning.

"Is that the Sandaime Kazekage?" Yami asked quietly, calm eyes looking over the puppet's features before turning his gaze back to Sasori, his real enemy.

Sasori tilted his head in surprise. "I'm curious as to how you know about this puppet. No one has known about the Sandaime Kazekage being in my collection and lived to tell of it. But to answer you original question, yes. This is the Sandaime Kazekage – the strongest Kazekage to have ever governed the Hidden Sand village, and my most prized puppet." The boy proclaimed in an almost prideful way, as if showing off to his enemy how powerful he truly was.

Yami closed his eyes gently in a sign of pity. "He must hate you... for locking his soul into an inanimate object... Hitokugutsu (human puppet)... A puppet made from the body of a living person, made in such a way that it retains the chakra that the victims had while still alive."

Sasori's eyes widened slightly at how much this boy knew about his techniques and abilities. Suddenly, he realised why this is so. "Ah, I see." A cruel smirk slowly stretched forth from his soft lips. "Looks like your Lady Oracle has been damn busy, snooping into other people's lives and learning their deepest, darkest secrets. What else has she been able to tell you about? How many kills I've made? How many people's lives I've ruined? How many times I've gone to the toilet? There must not be any privacy in your lives, I guess."

Yami's eyes snapped opened in a dark glare at the insult to the only woman he had ever had true respect for. Anyone who insults the name of Ruri-sama in front of any of the current 10 Gate Guardians would find himself or herself punished in the heaviest fashion, and Sasori of the Red Sand was no different. Continuing to openly glare at his enemy, Yami growled out, losing his calm instantly. "You'll regret ever saying that about Ruri-sama."

Not waiting any further, with a twitch of Sasori's delicate fingers and a twist of his wrist, the humanoid puppet quickly flew through the air towards Yami's position. From the right side of the puppet, many sharp blades filled with poison ripped its way out of the dark cloak, all aiming towards Yami's body intending to slice the boy in half. Yami waited til the last split second before twisting his body out of the way in a rapid movement that rivalled the puppet's own reactions.

Unconcerned by that move, Sasori twisted the fingers on his other hand and the puppet instantly reacted to his command. The other arm of the puppet was raised and in that exact moment, its forearms split open to reveal two opened panels, each with summoning scripts written within them. A sudden burst of smoke later and hundreds upon hundreds of puppet like arms stretched forth from more and more summoning scripts written upon dozens of wooden parts, all aiming towards Yami's new location.

The violet-eyed boy didn't even have time to blink before the masses of puppet arms were upon him. They slammed into the boy's slim body, smashing him into the sidewall of a half collapsed building, pushing all the way through the crumbling bricks and plunging into the ground, causing quite a large crater. Sasori's smirk was slowly wiped off however when before his very eyes, a small gathering of hazy-black particles drifted together. The black mass of miniscule atoms roamed and twisted in the air, slowly growing larger in size as more and more tiny fragments jointed together to form molecules. Slowly but surely, the black blob started to form a shape, a human shape. Once the overall structure of the human body was formed, it

slowly began to reflect different colours other than pure black. The form materialised into none other than Yami, who seemed to be completely calm and unconcerned that his body had been smashed to pieces before being reformed in such an unnatural manner.

Sasori's eyes were wide in surprise and even his mouth was hanging slightly open. Yami just looked back at him with nonchalance. "What are you?" Sasori finally whispered.

"I'm Shinzo Yami. My greatest ability is to dissolve myself into my molecular form and recreate myself whenever I please. It's called transmutation – the ability to change the molecular properties of a solid object. Basically speaking, I can never be touched or physically hurt, since I can take on a formless structure to begin with. After all, who can hurt something you can't even touch." Yami replied back in a calm, but cold manner.

Sasori's eyes narrowed in anger from being upstaged by this young amateur. In retaliation, he quickly flipped and twisted his fingers once more, forcing his puppet to do as he bid it to. A single wooden pipe poked its way through the mass of puppet arms and instantly shot forth a large cloud of gaseous poison directly into Yami's body. "Even in a formless body, you can't escape my poison!" Sasori snarled in reply. Another two pipes also poked forth, spitting out two long strings of wire with kunais attached to the end.

Yami simply stood still as the clouds of dark purple poison surrounded him and at the same time, the two strings of wire with kunais attached swung around him, tying him up and rendering him immovable.

"Heh heh. Those wires are chakra enhanced to absorb whatever transformation jutsu you're doing to your body. You won't be able to escape." Sasori taunted back, the snarl on his face slowly transforming into that of a smirk.

After waiting several seconds and breathing in as he normally would, Yami lifted his head and faced where he knew Sasori would be

standing. "You're wasting your time. I'm immune to all poisons." He stated almost patiently.

Sasori didn't even twitch. "As if I would believe you." He snorted in disgust at his enemy's play in deceit.

Yami almost wanted to sigh in disappointment – Sasori wasn't as strong as he had hoped, or at least, he hadn't shown his true powers yet, which was strange for a Kuunoki Ninja. Most Kuunoki ninjas knew of their own strengths and weaknesses, but there was one bad habit shared by all of them. When they fought, they held no restraints - they always went all out. Having an opponent who seemed intent on playing games before they finally turned serious seemed strange to Yami. After all, why waste time playing around when you could just finish the fight as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

So, this particular fight facing Sasori of the Red Sand was turning out to be slightly disappointing for Yami and his remarks reflected his growing irritation. "I'm a half breed Dokudes, the clan of poison handlers. Every Dokudes born and bred in the Village of the Air, whether you are a full breed, half-breed, quater breed or whatever, EVERY Dokudes learns to become immune to poison. There is absolutely no poison in the world that would hurt us, or have you forgotten that?" Yami's retort became louder as he went on, becoming more passionate with every word.

Realising the truth in the statement, Sasori, though surprised at this turn of events, didn't give Yami any chance to react further. */ I was told from the master that if we were to meet up with one of the Dokudes Clan, we should avoid them as much as possible. I'll have to end this quickly. /* Tapping, twisting and flicking his fingers in an infinite dance, more pipes emerged from the mass of arms, shooting forth plenty of poison laden kunai towards the still trapped Yami.

Seeing the kunais heading his way and slightly irritated at the boring way this fight is continuing, Yami decided to step it up a bit. Flowing his own Chakra into the strings holding on to him, he quickly overtook control from Sasori's end, snapping the wires easily with a

quick burst of poison laden, acidic chakra, eating away at the very seams of the wire itself. With the wires gone, Yami quickly transmuted himself into his molecular form, zipping through the cloud of poison, effortlessly passing through the barrage of kunais and reached Sasori's side almost instantaneously. Reforming himself into a half physical, half molecular structure, the upper body of Yami appeared solid and real, his right hand holding a large, deep black but sharp, ebony crystal shard next to Sasori's delicate neck; the lower half of his body still reside in a swirling mass of particles and half-formed atoms.

Reacting in instinct, Sasori slammed his elbow forcefully backwards at Yami's half formed chest before quickly twisting away from the weapon held at his neck. The ebony crystal actually did cut rather deeply into Sasori's neck as he passed by, but strangely enough, no blood leaked out from the cut. Avoiding the elbow by transmuting again and reappearing fully some distance away, Yami focused his attention almost immediately on the non-bleeding cut at Sasori's neck. Finally, he came to an interesting conclusion. "You've made your body into a puppet as well."

"Yes." Sasori answered succinctly, discarding the masses of arms of his puppet by dislodging the joints from the original wooden arm of the Sandaime Kazekage's puppet body and pulling the mannequin to his side. "No more playing around. You said that nothing solid could hurt you as you can turn yourself into a non-physical form. And poison doesn't work on you either because you're a Dokudes." Sasori calmly analysed, his eyes finally serious and very cold. "Let's just see if you can fight particle against particle, then." Placing his right hand horizontally over the back of his fisted left hand, Sasori made the impression of making hand seals. "Now, you will witness the most terrifying jutsu ever created in the Hidden Village of Sand, the single most powerful technique developed by the Sandaime Kazekage himself of whom was feared because of it. The Satetsu (Iron Sand)."

The mechanical mouth of the Sandaime Kazekage puppet opened slowly, and reddish sand particles gradually floated out of it. More of that same substance drifted, twisted and revolved together, forming and un-forming various shapes before staying as a large mass of red sand. Once all the sand had pored out of the puppet's mouth, it slowly slid closed.

From Yami's end, he too had not been standing idle. Softly clicking open the pockets that were strapped onto his tight black pants, Yami pulled various rectangular, thin pieces of those same ebony crystal plates as the crystal shard he used to cut Sasori's neck. "Then I won't hold back either. These are called 'Dyamon' crystals (2). They are the only substance in the world that can easily bend, twist and transmute itself by Chakra itself. Like me, it can be broken up into its molecular form, and using my charka, I can direct it to form whatever weapon I want, or even use it to create things that do not exist in this world altogether. Like your Iron Sand, my Dyamon crystals are perfect weapons."

With that said, the dyamon crystals cracked and then scattered into thousands of shards and particles that filled up the entire air before Yami. It was truly a spectacular sight. On Sasori's side, there are these huge blobs of red sand particles floating around him. On Yami's side, there is also a mass of more scattered black elements littered across the air space, ready and waiting for their master's command. This was a battle of control more than anything else. It was a battle to test the control of the user on their weapons.

As if a silent signal has been given, both the dark clouds of black and red mass suddenly surged forward. "Satetsu Shigure! (Iron Sand Rain!)" Sasori's red iron sand formed hundreds of small red pellets all speeding through the air towards Yami. Yami's own dyamon crystal molecules quickly collectively joined together and formed a thin, curved shield made up of multiple hexagon-shaped crystal shards, stopping Sasori's attack in mid air.

Regrouping, Sasori recalled his sand back and this time formed large red spikes, again, all directed at Yami. "Satetsu Ho! (Iron Sand

Sprikes!) (3)" Sasori called out again as his giant, menacing-looking red spikes surged through the air. This time, instead of blocking, Yami decided to evade. Both his body and the dyamon crystals under his control shattered into millions of atoms, effortlessly avoiding the spikes that punctured large holes onto the ground he once stood upon. The millions of particles reshaped itself some distance away and Yami simply shrugged some nonexistent dust of his shoulder, as if showing that he was not concerned at all about Sasori's attacks.

This time taking the offensive, Yami grabbed one of the dyamon shards floating in the air before him. Pushing some more of his unique chakra into the crystal structure, he willed it to take the form of a traditional weapon – a long sword. With a flick of his wrist, the shard elongated into a thin but lengthy, graceful sword with no hilt. Launching himself forward, Yami pulled the sword in front of him in an offensive stance while the other floating shards of dyamon crystal followed him in the air.

Flicking his fingers and twisting his wrists in every which way, Sasori summoned his iron sand to do his bidding. Reforming themselves into small pellets once again, the Satetsu Shigure rained down upon the rapidly approaching Yami with merciless intent. Yami however, wasn't idle as he was rushing forward, his own dyamon shards had instantly reacted to the threat by revolving around his moving figure, creating a constant, spherical shield, blocking and deflective any projectile as the Kaiten would do for a Hyuuga warrior.

The spherical shielding protected Yami while he made his way speedily towards Sasori's location. At the last second, Yami commanded his dyamon crystal shards to blast outward, blocking and deflecting all the red sand that stood in his way. With the iron sand now disposed of, Yami was finally upon Sasori.

Quickly flicking his fingers and dragging his arm across his chest, Sasori instantly brought forth the human puppet of the Sandaime Hokage directly in front of him, blocking Yami's path. At the same time, multiple sharp, poisoned blades suddenly shot forth out of the

puppet's chest, ready and waiting to intercept Yami's form. Unable to dodge at such a close range, Yami swung his sword around rapidly to deflect all the blades before piercing his dyamon sword right into the heart of the puppet. Twisting his body around, Yami jumped off from his stationed sword, performing a front flip summersault and a twist in mid-air over the puppet's body before aiming a kick directly at Sasori's face.

Sasori, seeing the oncoming appendage, blocked Yami's leg with his own arm before using his other hand's fingers and twisted the puppet back to his side, only to find out that his Hitokugutsu (Human puppet) didn't move an inch. Glaring over at his prized marionette, Sasori's eyes widened at the strange black substance that was literary crawling all over its wooden body.

"Heh. You aren't the only person who can use particles to obstruct a marionette's movements. With my dyamon crystal atoms lodge in its joins, your puppet is nothing more than a blunt weapon." Yami calmly explained even while he gracefully jumped away, landing elegantly back onto the ground. However, before he could use this opportunity to attack again, a giant shot of light erupted somewhere in the distance, blinding both Sasori and Yami for a short amount of time.

When both their eyes were able to adjust to the brightness factor that suddenly enveloped the entire village of Konoha, Yami suddenly realised what's happening. "He's using *it* ?" Stunned for a short second, Yami quickly looked back at his opponent, ignoring the glaring confusion in Sasori's accusing eyes, Yami calmly replied. "It seems like we won't be able to continue our fight for now. I look forward to challenging you another time, Sasori of the Red Sand. (4)" With that said, Yami abruptly dropped to the ground in a meditative state, placing his palms together in a praying gesture, he closed his eyes and gathered all the dyamon crystal towards him before solidifying them and laying them on the ground around him in a circular pattern. With that done, Yami quickly suppressed his Chakra usage to an absolute minimum. / *It won't attack anything below a certain Chakra level. So I have to concentrate and suppress*

*my Chakra as much as possible. Let's hope Koushiro-san really knows what he's doing. Pulling **this jutsu** out in such a situation is reckless at the best of times. I hope everything turns out okay at the end, or else Naruto-sama would be furious. /*

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx
(Akiko Vs Deidara)

Deidara's and Akiko's game of tag seemed to have absolutely no end to it.

At one point, Akiko would concentrate chakra into her palms, creating small but invisible condensed balls of air and flung it in Deidara's direction. In return, Deidara would swiftly avoid the incoming attack by twisting away, which always resulted in Akiko either destroying part of another Konoha building or blowing up a big crater in the ground. One way or the other, Akiko seemed to be enjoying being 'it', while Deidara seemed to be getting tired of being chased. The two just would not admit defeat.

Bitting his thumb's nail, face a mask of seriousness, Deidara narrowed his eyes at the pursuer behind him, mentally telling his summoned clay-bird to dodge yet another air blast by swinging to the right, barely avoiding a half toppled building directly in front of them. But Akiko wasn't so easily swayed, she followed him on her flying boomerang, imitating the dangerous move just as easily, which made Deidara all the more angry at his opponent. */ I can't keep on running away like this. I have to attack... but how. /* At the same time, he forcefully ignored the loud taunts and shouts from the braided girl behind him.

"Oi! Oi! Running away already? Come on! I still haven't had enough fun yet! Deidara-KUN!" Akiko happily sang out loud in a sing-song voice, practically screeching with her high pitched voice. However, Deidara persisted in ignoring the hyena behind him, fully concentrating on what he must do to be rid of the loud girl.

After a few moments of thinking, he came to a decision. Swiftly changing direction again, the giant clay-modelled bird practically did a full vertical flip, twisting horizontally while up-side-down going over the form of Akiko and her boomerang as they passed by, before full stabilising again in balance and heading in the direct opposite way they had originally come from. Behind them, Deidara twitched his eyebrow as he heard Akiko scream out the words: "COOL MOVE!"

Commanding his bird to fly down as low as possible, Deidara had to be 100 percent attuned to his opponent's movements, just in case she decided to launch another air blast at him. But lucky for Deidara, Akiko didn't do anything except watch from a safe distance. She was finding this entire chase very boring at the moment and was hoping that Deidara would be able to do something radical to lighten up her day.

*/ This is so **BORING!** I bet Jubei and Katana are having fun screwing around with their opponent's minds. Well, Jubei would since he's against Yuuki-hime-sama's disciple, but Katana would be more into chopping their heads off all together. Man, it's no not fair! /* Akiko mentally whined to herself in a childish manner.

Seeing an opportunity, Deidara dived to one side, practically hanging right off his pet bird's body. Stretching out his hand, Deidara grabbed onto as much dust and sand that was being blown upwards into the air by his bird's continuous flapping wings. Unbeknownst to Akiko, Deidara had already opened the mouth within the palm of his outstretched hands (5). With its mouth open, it was able to swallow and suck in as much earthly sand for as long as Deidara could hold onto his bird while standing in such an awkward angle.

Having gathered enough earth, sand and dust within his body, Deidara pulled himself back into a straight posture before silently ordering his bird to fly up into the air. Once he had reached a good enough altitude, Deidara and his bird stopped flying and turned around to face Akiko as she continued to race towards him. Opening his palms wide open in the direction of Akiko, Deidara's extra

'mouths' suddenly opened and spit forth the sand that it had consumed before hand.

Having come to such a close distance, Akiko was unable to dodge all the sand particles that were coming right towards her, splattering across her face, invading her eyes and nostrils, luckily, it didn't get into her mouth. Quickly shutting her eyes in order to stop more sand from hurting them, Akiko literary stopped in mid air as well, allowing Deidara to quickly move aside. The last coherent thing Akiko heard was Deidara's whispered words: "Art is a bang."

Suddenly, loud explosions and massive blasts surrounded her body and all the air space around her current location. Akiko could literary feel the minute particles of sand on the surface of her skin erupt with charka and burst forth in a linear fashion, creating a long line of diminutive explosions but when put together, caused quite a lot of damage. What was even worse were the heat and sudden spark of flames around her eyes and nose. Whining in pain, Akiko desperately waved her hands around, hoping to block out most of the blast but they continued on, mercilessly burning her skin, eyes and nose even while surrounding her with even more air-bombs just waiting for her to move in order to sent them off.

Immediately pissed off at being hurt, Akiko erupted in a loud roar and let part of her hidden temper out. In a sudden eruption of chakra, Akiko released a highly condensed spherical shield of air particles in an ever-expanding nova, igniting and blowing away all the left over explosive sand that is still attached to her body and the surrounding air space. In that one big move, she had also knocked Deidara off his flying clay model, when it was caught in the resounding blast.

Having jumped off just in time to avoid the insuring explosion, Deidara landed slightly haphazardly on a collapsed building. Turning and looking back, Deidara's eyes widened at the appearance of Akiko. The annoying bratty display of a girl from before had completely disappeared, leaving behind a dangerous looking, braided women with pure white eyes with no iris or pupil to speak of. All the damage that had once been done by his explosive sand had

also seemingly disappeared as all the small bruises, cuts and wounds slowly but surely healed itself as if the damage had never been done in the first place.

/ A Dokudes...? One of those people who can automatically heal their own wounds...? Or something else? / Deidara frantically thought to himself as the women glared down at him with cold hate. However, any further disputes between the two of them came to an abrupt halt with sudden flare of bright, brilliant light blinding both Akiko and Deidara.

In fact, Akiko was so distracted by the light that she almost fell off her own boomerang. Finally settling down from her earlier temper, Akiko could slowly feel her awareness return and soon, even her eyes returned to normal but they were still squinting at the unnatural, iridescent light that literally illuminated the entire Leaf Village. Suddenly, she realised what this light meant. */ SHXT! Koushiro is going to use **THAT** Jutsu? FXXK! I gotta get down from here! /* Manoeuvring herself and her boomerang down into the safe ground once more, Akiko quickly took up a meditative stance, completely ignoring the bewildered Deidara.

*/ Damn! I'm so lucky that I snapped out of it at the last second, or else who knew what was going to happen to me if I was caught up in **that** jutsu. Shxt! What was Koushiro thinking? ... /* Akiko continued to mentally rant to herself and on the spoiled fight between herself and Deidara, but she knew the consequences of continuing to fight while that particular jutsu was in effect, and she was definitely NOT taking any chances. So, without any further interruptions, Akiko suppressed her own Chakra capacity as low as possible as not to be detected by the 'thing' that jutsu produces. If anything attracts its attention, you can be sure that it won't survive for very long.

Through out that entire time, Deidara was wondering what the hell was going on. Though he noticed that Akiko was fully concentrating on suppressing her own chakra, Deidara didn't feel any need to do that, as he was pretty much out of chakra and explosive sand all together. Sure, he could collect some more sand from the earth, but

at this moment in time, he needed to recuperate a little. It's all just been such a tiring day and not to mention, he was very interested in what was about to happen next.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx
(Hikari and Koushiro)

After several minutes of full-on concentration, Hikari finally finished chanting the words to the spell being cast into the real world environment. Though technically a 'jutsu' in definition, the Hikari no Gen'ei (Illusion of light) is very different to any other physical jutsu or illusionary Genjutsu.

Instead of attacking and manipulating the minds of the enemy like a normal Genjutsu, the Hikari no Gen'ei uses its creator's chakra to mould the 'light' in the environment (whether it be ambience light, sun light, spot light or whatever) and gives it substance – resulting in a solid form. So while she creates illusions from her imagination, - for the short amount of time that Hikari no Gen'ei (Illusion of light) is in effect - whatever she conjures up mentally becomes real. They truly exist, in a physical, solid sense. They have mass and weight, they can take attacks and fight back – just like a collection of Kage Bunshins only this technique isn't confined to humanoid beings.

Originally, the Hikari no Gen'ei was a jutsu created by Hikari to rival the infamous Shadow manipulation techniques of the great Kaga-san. Kaga, as the last shadow master was the only living person in the world that could use shadows in order to create his own world, in which he makes all the rules. It was a blend of a kekai jutsu (Barrier Technique) and a manipulation Ninjutsu – enabling him to capture his enemies within his 'shadow field' and play with them as he so wish.

Hikari's own version, though not as strong nor as large in scale, was able to imitate some of Kaga's own manipulation Ninjutsu. Giving life to her illusions, she could summon an invisible wind to cut and slice anything she desired. She could create fires that did not exist in the

real plane, or conjure demons from the very depths of her imagination to haunt her enemies. Anything was possible and the greatest aspect about the Hikari no Gen'ei (Illusion of light) was that anyone caught up within the field could not escape, not until the jutsu itself was released.

When the Hikari no Gen'ei was activated, it automatically affected an area around the user – namely around 100 metre radius of the user's current location. Anyone coming into this 100-metre radius would have been affected by the very-real conditions created by Hikari.

She slumped her shoulders as she felt the jutsu come into affect and slowly start to drain her energy in order to continue the jutsu, Hikari opened her eyes slowly before glaring forlornly at her brother, already feeling the effects of the draining.

Nodding back in response, Koushiro signalled to his sister that he understood that she was telling him to get on with it. Sitting up straighter in his meditative posture, Koushiro placed his hands together in a praying motion. Quietly, his lips too, started moving on their own accord, verbally casting the spell in words instead of using hand seals (6). Like Hikari, to activate the Raiten Ryuu! (Lightning Sky Dragon) much time and concentration was required – of which, Koushiro had never been very fond of, so it would probably take him double the effort to complete as his sister.

Several minutes passed in similar fashion before Koushiro finally paused in his chanting, his eyes slowly opened to reveal bright glowing energy that pulsed outward in an eerie flow. His pupils and irises were completely obscured by the brilliantly glowing light - implying that he had touched a power that was far beyond humans could imagine.

High above their heads, dark clouds started to gather in a swirling cyclonic shape. Thunderous roars and sparks of lightning followed the hurricane winds that accompanied the clouds. It was quite a sight, almost as if the heavens were angry at the battle before them. Suddenly, a huge surge of lightning ploughed through the clouds

straight downward and smashed right on top of Koushiro's body, swallowing the area around him in a 3-metre radius. Lucky for Hikari, she had jumped some distances away when she saw the forming of the clouds. This blinding beam of vertically linear light continued to burn brightly, as the high density lightning elements fused with Koushiro's body into becoming an avatar for something even more powerful.

Slowly but surely, the blinding light receded, growing thinner and becoming gracefully curved then the stark linear shape it had been before. As time passed, those who had witnessed the strange summoning soon had their mouths wide open at the sight before them. A giant white dragon, peered silently back, it's eyes glowing with the essence of life that seemed beyond human comprehension. The lightning that had struck the earth pulling itself out in a slow process revealed itself a very long and elegant neck attached to the white demon beast. The infinitely long neck and slender body of the dragon beast seems to stretch forever and beyond in the clouds above Konoha. The twists and turns of the light creature slightly covered by dark clouds in some areas and revealed freely in others, caused many people to wonder exactly how long this dragon really was – of if it ended at all (7).

Deep in the mind of the beast, Koushiro's consciousness floated.

I am one with this demon beast.

I am one with the sky dragon.

My mission is to destroy all those who have any ill intent towards the Uzumaki heir.

*I am... the **Lord of the Skies***

With that fact established between his human consciousness and the dragon heart that beat with him. Koushiro now had a mission, a

goal. And the simplest way to accomplish this goal was to destroy anything that could be a threat to the young Uzumaki heir. Destroy anything that has a high enough Chakra content in order to become a threat to the Uzumaki. Anyone above a certain Chakra level was targeted, without mercy, without hesitation.

An instant later, the dragon moved. Moving at rapid speeds, the dragon smashed against several remaining buildings, jaws wide open in preparation to swallow those who it deemed strong enough to be considered a threat. Most civilians and any remaining zombie guards controlled by Orochimaru were passed over with little concern showed by the dragon, as they all had very low Chakra content. All genins and many Chuunins too miraculously escaped the clutches of the dragon as it twisted in mid air and launched itself in another direction, blasting its way through and clamping down on any enemy ninja stupid enough to not jump out of the way.

The Konoha Jounins have the most difficult task of trying to dodge the radical lunges made by the sky dragon, knowing instinctively that if they were caught in its jaws it would be their doom. However, since most of the fighting had been concentrated onto the centre of the village itself, of which Tori and Hikari were still moving around, already suppressing their own Chakra reserves and warning all Konoha Jounins to do the same.

On the far side of the earth wall erupted by Tori, Katana happily ignored the presence of the dragon. Since he was mainly using Taijutsu in his attacks, he had nothing to fear, as he isn't using his chakra reserves at all.

In the section of Konoha where Orochimaru and Kabuto still resided, they watched in awe as the powerful dragon seemingly ripped its way through the village, not caring how much damage it was doing. Jiraiya had already warned Tsunade that she should suppress her Chakra as much as possible in order to avoid this Jutsu. Though Jiraiya himself had never come across this jutsu in real life before,

he had heard rumours about the Raiten Clan, who could theoretically summon such a fearsome creature and how they are attracted to high Chakra reserve people. Seiko, in similar fashion had sat down instantly and suppressed her own Chakra as much as possible.

Seeing that they had a moment of reprieve, Orochimaru quickly glanced back at Kabuto, giving him the silent signal that they should get out of here right now. Following in his master's footsteps, Kabuto quickly pulled out a small, strange wooden contraption from under his clothes. Pulling the string attached to the device quickly, it shot forth a beautiful red flamethrower directly into the sky, signalling to all Sound Nins present that it was time for them to retreat. Shifting the still unconscious Kimimaro into a steadier grip, both Kabuto and Orochimaru quickly slithered away, without even looking back at whether their enemies or allies were following them or not.

To the surprise of both Jiraiya and Tsunade, Seiko continued to sit and meditate as if nothing was wrong at all, completely ignoring the enemy Shinobis that ran past her, not even pausing in stride to see if they've left any survivors behind. It was very strange that Seiko hadn't gotten up and pursued her prey – namely, Yakushi Kabuto, but even stranger is that Seiko did nothing against the retreating Sound Nin. Normally, Seiko would have been the first to jump at the chance of doing some action. Personality, Seiko, Katana and Akiko were the three most prone to act first, think later. And to watch the young girl just sit there without a care in the world was shocking. But Jiraiya and Tsunade had bigger problems to worry about than just the girl's reasons. They both looked back at the destruction and chaos already caused by the dragon. They both knew that it would take Konoha long in order to get back on its feet after this assault.

Deidara watched in silent awe as the dragon ripped its way through a few of the stronger Sound Nins, literary disintegrating them with a single touch. He was ever so grateful that in his current disposition, his Chakra reserves was pretty much nil, or at least close to a genins level, so he didn't have to fear this giant white menace. However,

Deidara soon caught sight of two small silhouettes that the dragon was currently chasing. Noticing the familiar Akatsuki coats on both the dragon's prey, Deidara gulped as he realised it was chasing his own comrades. Heaving a sigh, Deidara jumped off his perch in the direction of his fellow Akatsuki members – Kisame and Sasori. It was time for all of them to leave anyway, the situation had become way too dangerous for them to handle, especially with those new and intense fighters from the Kuunoki. And Deidara was for one, not the type who wished to die so early in the game.

Kisame cursed under his breath as he jumped to the side, just barely avoiding the sizzling effects of the giant white dragon's scale electrocuting anything in the vicinity. Having escaped his first encounter with the giant water dragon, summoned by Shinji's niece, Kisame was really started to hate facing Dragon summons. It was just his luck to be targeted yet again and he just didn't know why this stupid beast wouldn't leave him alone. He had tried a few water based jutsus – nothing too big as he didn't want to waste any more Chakra but nothing seems to work, and the Dragon (once it had spotted the blue skinned Shinobi) refuse to leave him alone. The only time it had even distracted by this chase was if Sasori just so happen to be in the vicinity – in which case, the Dragon may twitch its attention for a short period of time, giving Kisame a chance to lengthen the distance between them. But that in itself, didn't give Kisame much reprieve at all, because soon enough, the dragon would be on his trail once again.

As the chaos continued around Konoha, with the Akatsuki members desperately avoiding the attacks of an infuriated dragon, and the Sound Ninjas slowly but surely retreating their main forces; the rest of Konoha started capturing any enemy Shinobi left behind in the wake of battles. All the Medic Nins and available ninja were also out in force to gather up all the injured people as they could and administer first aid. On a safe location at the top of the Hokage Towers, Naruto tightened his fist. The tension in the air was thick and

volatile, but he knew he had to keep calm. The threat of the Sound against Konoha is over, but the Akatsuki was still here. And now more than ever, he needed his 10 Gate Guardians to drive them out as soon as possible. Even if it meant causing more damage to Konoha, he was willing to pay the price.

Deep inside the mind of the dragon beast, Koushiro's conscious stirred once again. He could feel hot and stressed. He knew it was a sign that he couldn't hold on to this jutsu for too long. He had already passed his previous limit of time using this powerful summon. / *Only a little bit more. Just a minute more...* / He mentally prayed as he forced his body to reach deep into his chakra reserves and draw more of the life's energy out to sustain the Jutsu.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx
(Jubei Vs Itachi)

Throwing multiple kunais and shurikens towards his enemy, Itachi jumped high into the air and manoeuvred his weapon's direction by the steel wires attached to each of the projectiles, surged with his own chakra making them obey his mental commands. The various kunais and shurikens all passed through the transportation rings commanded by Jubei without effort. However, instead of being passed through another ring and striking harmless objects like a tree or the ground, once the weapons emerged from their transportation rituals, they immediately twisted and revolved around each other, flying into more rings and out of others.

The entire process repeated itself again and again until finally, Itachi landed some distance away and tightened his grip on the wires – which resulted in him pulling all the strings together around Jubei to form a chain that locked the Dokudes half-breed in place. Not waiting a second longer, Itachi quickly performed his jutsu and bit tightly onto the wire: "Ryuuka no Jutsu (Dragon Fire Technique)!" The flames travelled along the strings at a rapid pace, burning through the rings

from one end to the other, causing a huge bond fire to occur with Jubei still trapped within.

In the face of his doom, Jubei smirked nonchalantly. Closing his eyes in concentration, with a sudden surge of chakra being released from all the tenketsu (opening points) on his body, Jubei jerked forward and instantly, all the strings that once held him in place snapped, releasing him from Itachi's hold. However, as the fire was almost onto him, Jubei bent down low in a familiar stance of the Hyuuga Jyuuken style. "Kaiten!" Rapidly spinning around on the same location, Jubei effectively blew away Itachi's attempt at burning him with the Ryuuka no Jutsu. But just before Jubei launched his own counter attack, they were interrupted by a blinding light in the distance - where the heart of Konoha once stood.

Immediately recognising the jutsu as Koushiro's most powerful jutsu, Jubei slumped his shoulders in relaxation before turning his attention to Itachi, who hadn't shifted his gaze away from his enemy. "Looks like we'll have to finish this fight another day, Itachi-san. It would be best for you and your comrades to leave Konoha, before they are eaten alive by the Raiten Ryuu." Jubei warned the Uchiha prodigy in a kind, warm voice, smile never leaving his face.

Minutely glancing at the giant, sizzling white dragon tearing its way across the village, chasing his very comrades, Itachi silently debated to himself which decision should he make. On one hand, he could ignore the lives of Kisame and the others and continue to have fun playing with Jubei. On the other hand, the boss would not be happy if he was the only one to return to base if the others had died.

No matter what the case, Itachi realised that the Akatsuki had made a fundamentally big mistake – they had underestimated their adversary. The Lady Oracle of the Hidden Air was truly a master strategist. But in sending all her best warriors here to protect her heir, did that mean that the Kuunoki was currently vulnerable to attack? Somehow, he just couldn't imagine it. No, it's much more probably that she had found some very powerful allies into her side.

Which made it all the more difficult to challenge the Kuunoki. No, it was best to retreat now and recover their losses.

Turning back to look at Jubei, Itachi gave the man a miniscule nod, before quickly darting towards the direction of Konoha.

Jumping from tree to tree, Itachi effortlessly jumped over the newly summoned stonewall that protected Konoha from any outside forces. He ignored the slaughtered remains of a whole army below him as he could sense one of the Kuunoki ninjas glaring at him as he made his pass, but the boy did not follow him, of which Itachi was infinitely grateful. Once he was on the inside, it wasn't hard for Itachi to find his fellow Akatsuki members; after all, all he had to do was follow the dragon's head. Getting close enough to his comrades, Itachi launched a water-based jutsu at the dragon to distract it before motioning for the others to follow him and leave their assignment for now. The others followed compliantly, all three looked worse for wear and were pretty low on Chakra.

Behind them, Koushiro too had slowly started to lose control of his jutsu. The water based attack was the last straw, tearing his concentration apart, and leaving him unable to hold together the pule elements of lightning to sustain the form of the dragon. Eventually, the dragon disintegrated into thin air, the dark clouds above Konoha slowly drifted away, and Koushiro's body reformed itself and fell from the heavens, right into the safe arms of his sister.

It was over... The invasion of the Sound and the Rain... The raid from the Akatsuki... It was all finally over.

(End)

(1) Technically speaking, I don't know exactly what Sasori's real hair colour is, or his eye colour for that matter; so I'm just guessing my way through this. There have been plenty of fans colouring in the manga version of him, but no one really knows he's real hair and eye

colour, as Kishimoto hasn't produced a coloured image of him yet. So all of this is only speculation. For those people who want don't follow the manga and want to have a look at Sasori's real face, I'm sorry but I'm not going to be publishing his face on the Internet, it would spoil too much for you people. You're just going to have to take my word for it.

(2) Original minerals if you will. They don't exist in real life so don't go looking for it in some sort of mineral book.

(3) Sasori did use this attack in the manga but it wasn't given a name so I just added one for my own sake.

(4) For the manga readers, I know that I hadn't incorporated all of Sasori's moves from the manga into this chapter, but I didn't want to spoil it all for the non-manga readers. And anyway, I didn't really like the outcome of Sasori's fight, so in my story, I'm going to have it end in a different way.

(5) I did say that Deidara had another secret, didn't I. Anyway, all the manga followers would have already known this but for those of you who don't follow the manga, I'll try to explain what the hell I'm talking about. Deidara's hands are unique; it has a 'mouth' – as in literal terms – a mouth with teeth and a tongue. When Deidara moulds his clay imitation models, what actually happens is that the 'mouth' in his palm EATS the clay and then spits out the model. The interesting bit is that whatever the 'mouth' eats up and spits out, turns into 'explosive' stuff – especially if it's clay.

(6) Some people will probably find it weird that I keep on giving the Air Nins jutsus without any hand seals. Here's an explanation why: From my interpretation, hand seals are just to help people direct their Chakra a certain way in order to create particular jutsus, think of it as a short cut keys on the keyboard of your computer. Because most of the Kuunoki Ninjas have been trained since they were very young in order to control their chakra precisely, their manipulation of their own chakra system is quite high (to and above the ability of a Hyuuga). As such, I took away all the hassle of using hand seals completely.

For people like Tori (who has a pack with Earth), all he has to do is clap his hands together and whatever jutsu he wishes to use is instantly activated. Same with Seiko and her poisons, most of these people's Jutsu activation are touch sensitive. Naruto still can't do this yet as he's still learning the Chakra manipulation skills. However, in some instances, I've let people like Ruri, Hikari and Koushiro use chanting to help them focus on releasing a jutsu – this is actually something completely different to hand seals. We all know that 'Chakra' is made up of both physical stamina and spiritual energy. In some of my invented jutsus (like the Star Sealing systems), the user actually split Chakra up into its 2 basic components in order to activate the jutsu – this means that in some circumstance, while the user is sitting down in a meditative posture, their body is automatically directing the physical stamina into doing whatever they want it to do, and the chanting is to help with directing the spiritual energy into the same process. Mind you, all this is just made up, I'm just explaining the theory behind my own whacked up universe – hope you guys are still following.

(7) If anyone has seen the Shen Long Dragon from Dragon Ball / Dragon Ball Z / Dragon Ball GT / etc. then you would know what I'm talking about. It's that same infinitely long and curvy/twisty type impression that makes you wonder exactly if Shen long had a tail to begin with (and if so, where is it?).

Sorry for the long wait, I have no excuses and I won't try to blame it on anything else other than laziness. But so far, I'm pretty happy with how the story is progressing and I hope that you all like it too. Please put in a review and let me know what you think.

The next chapter will have NO battle scenes what so ever. Thank god! I'm getting tired of writing fights myself. It will concentrate more on the relationships and clashes in personality between the Kuunoki Ninjas and the Konoha residents, how will Naruto handle the pressure? Find out in the next chapter of Restoration of Faith . Enjoy!

Restore, Restart and Retribution

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Sixteen: Restore, Restart and Retribution

"**Demon's talk**" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: OOC for a few characters, building on the relationships and personalities. This chapter is **BORING** compared to the previous ones but it's still important information anyway. I wanted to emphasise the true horrors of losing your home and painful reconstruction that it requires – how one night's or day's terror can end up scarring entire societies for their rest of that generation's lives.

I'll develop more on the specific interactions between characters later in the next chapter. So I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 16

Glancing around, Naruto stood silently as he let his eyes take in the devastation that surrounded him. Never in his life could he have predicted that the once proud and thriving Konoha could possibly be decimated in just one day of fighting. Just one day and the entire face of Konoha were forever changed. His tightened fist shook with suppressed rage, hate, and guilt. If he hadn't been in Konoha, the Akatsuki would not have attacked, and if the Akatsuki had not come,

then the 10 Gate Guardians would have no reason to follow him. The guardians were famous for having no restraints whenever they fought; they had no concern for the lives of other people and certainly less concern over the citizen's homes. The blood that ran through those belonging to the village hidden in the air, only responded to the calls of their superior – namely the seven councillors and the Uzumaki family. They showed no sympathy to anyone else. It was a selfish existence, but an existence forged by past betrayals and unforgiven pains.

As one born between the Kuunoki and Konoha, Naruto was torn between understanding the ideologies of each village. Konoha valued each individual person and their 'home' village. The spirit of fire lived in everyone that shared this place they called home. To the Kuunoki, places and things didn't matter because with time, everything would eventually crumble and wither away, so why would they treasure something that would be eventually lost? The past and present didn't really matter, the only concern was how to move forward and progress. And standing here now, before the results of a clash in ideology between the Air and the Leaf, it was all just a little too much for the blonde boy to take in all at once.

Naruto slowly shut his eyes, taking a shuddering breath, and fought against the wetness in his eyes that wished to drip down his face as tears. No, now was not the time to cry or have a breakdown, he could do that later. Opening his refocused eyes, Naruto narrowed his concentration on all the surviving Medic Nins running around healing as many injured as they could while other Shinobis dragged corpses away to the forest to be burnt. It was better to burn them now before the smell of rotting flesh became too strong. The villagers emerged from the safety of their hiding places only to look upon the devastation that had engulfed their village.

This was their home, perhaps the only home they had ever known and now, it looked even worse than when the Sound and Sand first attacked during the Chuunin Exams. There were only a handful of buildings still standing; where were the villagers going to live? Their

entire livelihoods destroyed in a single day - all their money, their assets, their businesses, their homes, all gone up in flames and rubble.

Naruto took another shuddering breath to stabilise his raging emotions. */ I can't cry. I can't have a break down now... I can do that later. Later!* / Naruto mentally promised himself as he quickly thought through what should be his highest priority at this moment in time. */ Secure Konoha, help the survivors, and rebuild Konoha. In that order.* / Naruto finally decided.

Raising his voice, Naruto called out in a firm tone: "Gate Guardians! Assemble!" Instantly, all 10 Gate Guardians appeared directly in front of Naruto, with the exception of Maya who had always stood behind him slightly to the side. Surprising, some of the Gate Guardians were unconscious, which was a very rare occurrence indeed. Both Mishizu and Koushiro were comatose, being carried respectively on the backs of Yami and Hikari. Narrowing his eyes in concern, Naruto asked in a softer voice, "What happened to them?" indicating the two comatose figures with his chin.

Hikari blushed slightly but replied none the less. "Koushiro and Mishizu are just exhausted, Naruto-sama. They used up all their Chakra during their fights." Looking down onto the ground in shame, she murmured softly in apology. "I'm so sorry, Naruto-sama. We did not intend to cause Konoha so much damage, we only intended to force the Akatsuki out, and that jutsu was the strongest we could have come up with. I sincerely apologise for the mess we've made and would willingly bare any punishment as you see fit." Calm and firm, Hikari tensed her shoulders (with Koushiro on her back) as she faced Naruto's calm eyes again in determination, willing her body to take whatever punishment Naruto-sama can think up.

Next to the older girl, Seiko took a step forward and performed a half bow to Naruto. "I have also failed, Naruto-sama. I let the traitor – Yakushi Kabuto – escape. I would bare any punishment as you see fit." Seiko righted herself slowly before turning blank eyes to Naruto.

Glancing around at the surrounding debris, Naruto sighed heavily. His shoulders

slumped in defeat. "Seiko, Hikari and Koushiro. Your punishments will come later." Pausing in speech, Naruto closed his eyes slightly to gather his thoughts before opening them again and gazing at the three people in front of him. "I'm not even the one you should be apologising to. It should be to Konoha that you should be apologising to."

Sighing again, Naruto reconsidered his thoughts from the point of view of his subordinates. "You probably did what you thought was right. You did what was needed in order to win. However, I hope that the next time you fight; you will learn better restraint in order to at least be able to not cause as much damage. Remember, you are no longer in Kuunoki, as such; you must obey the rules and regulations of the country you reside. This means that as long as you are in Konoha, you must show your respect to Konoha." Naruto finished, shifting his eyes back onto the row of people in front of him.

A short pause in silence lasted between all who are present in the discussion before Naruto coughed and regained his composure. "Now, I'm giving you all orders to help the survivors as well as secure and rebuild Konoha. Jubei, Yami and Seiko, the three of you will help out the Medical Ninjas in healing all the wounded people, Ninja or civilian. Katana, you survey and secure the borders and capture any enemy Nin and bring them back to the interrogation squad. Tori and Akiko, help clean up the debris but leave the personal assets aside, and start growing more timber trees for the future reconstruction of the village. Maya, help reorientate the civilians as well as deal with the dead bodies. Since Mishizu and Koushiro will be useless for the next few weeks, they will be staying with me; as will you, Hikari. Is there any questions?" Naruto called out in a commanding voice.

Jubei raised his hand gently. "I have a request, Naruto-sama." Naruto nodded, indicating for Jubei to continue. "May I have your permission to refuse healing anyone of Hyuuga lineage?" Naruto

narrowed his eyes as both Yami and Seiko nodded towards Jubei's request.

It's true that all three Guardians (Jubei, Seiko and Yami) had either full Dokudes blood or half Dokudes blood, and as such, they were highly versatile in Medical Ninja techniques. But Naruto also understood the deep hate that Jubei had against the Hyuuga family, and he really couldn't force the older boy to do something he didn't want to. Who was to say Jubei and the others wouldn't poison the Hyuuga patients when given the chance, especially if the patient belonged to the Hyuuga Main house. After a moment of mental debate, Naruto consented to Jubei's request. "I give you permission to refuse any Hyuuga requiring your healing expertise. However, you must not refuse any other persons, Ninja and civilians alike." Jubei consented to the deal and all the Gate Guardians disappeared into their various roles, leaving behind Naruto, Hikari, the still unconscious Mishizu and Koushiro (who were dropped gently onto the ground before the others left).

Sighing heavily once more, Naruto quickly flipped through a few hand seals and created two shadow clones by his side. Each of the clones picked up and carried Mishizu and Koushiro as the entire group started heading towards the makeshift hospital area. Naruto really needed to talk to Tsunade right about now and he knew that the Sannin would definitely be at the makeshift hospital, helping to heal any of the more seriously injured people as she possibly could. On the way there however, Naruto met up with a few of his Konoha comrades.

"Oi! Naruto!" A rough voice called out in the distance. Naruto turned around slightly and found both Kiba (with Akamaru by his side) and Shino running towards him. Well, Kiba and Akamaru were running, but Shino was just walking calmly. Both the dog boy and bug boy spotted a few wounds and injuries on their body; certain parts of their clothes were ripped and stained with dry blood. But overall, both seemed healthy and survived the invasion pretty well. Naruto felt a part of his tightened heart release some of its tension. He had been

very afraid that some of his fellow comrades would have died during the invasion. He was not ready to repeat another episode of losing a friend, the trauma suffered after Elle's death was more than enough, Naruto refused to lose another of his precious people.

"Hey, Kiba, Akamaru, Shino. How are you all?" Naruto gave them a wane smile, but a smile none the less.

"Heh. Could be better." The dog boy's normally energetic liveliness was missing as he shrugged his slightly slumped shoulders, signifying to Naruto just how tired Kiba really was. "I found my Sis and Mom. They're both okay. A few scratches here and there, but fine overall. But our entire street has been demolished... and our neighbour lost a little girl." Kiba's face was shadowed; his shoulders shook with suppressed emotion. Akamaru whined at its master, rubbing his face on the boy's feet.

Naruto's wane smile instantly disappeared. He took a step forward and wrapped an arm around Kiba in comfort. When asked later why he had done so, he couldn't answer. But for now, this was all he could give Kiba – consolidation, understanding and sympathy. Glancing at Shino's face, Naruto waited patiently for the quiet boy's report.

Shino shrugged stiffly. "My family is fine. A bit tired but fine. We didn't lose anyone. And our house was far enough away from the main battle to have survived with very little damage." His calm voice betrayed his depression slightly. The guilt of having not lost anyone close to him and his home, compared to those who have lost everything, was immense. But at the same time, Shino was so very glad that he had come out pretty much unscathed, and that relief only brought more guilt and pity for others who weren't so fortunate.

Shrugging away Naruto's arm and sniffing slightly, Kiba turned his attention to the strange threesome standing beside Naruto's two clones. Nodding towards their direction, Kiba inquired. "Who are they?"

Naruto turned his gaze towards Hikari and the unconscious duo beside her. "The reinforcement I talked about before. Let me introduce you. The girl with the bandana is Raitei Hikari. The unconscious boy is her twin brother, Raitei Koushiro and the last unconscious person is named Kaiba Mishizu. They are all Shinobis of the Air, here to protect me."

Kiba whistled impressively. "So she's one of the ones who brought on the fireworks display?" Kiba asked tilted his head slightly, looking appraisingly at the older girl who stared back with a blank expression on her face. His eyes glinted in uncertainty, not sure of whether he should feel angry, threatened or just plain glad that they fought on Konoha's side, instead of the enemies. A jumble of emotions surged through his heart, unable to unravel them all, Kiba continued to stare with unblinking eyes, unsure of how to continue the conversation.

Naruto gave Hikari a firm glare from Kiba's side, silently commanding her to repent for her deeds. Eyes widening in understanding, Hikari immediately dropped down to her knees and lowered her head in respect in front of both boys and dog. Both Kiba and Shino were so shocked by the action that they took an unmitigated step back from the sudden motion.

"I am the one responsible for most of the destruction caused to Konoha by the white dragon you have seen before you. I am willing to endure any retribution you see fit for my actions." The older girl stated calmly even while her head stayed lowered.

Kiba blinked in confusion before shifting his eyes to a nonchalantly standing Naruto who was looking at anywhere except at them and the girl on her knees. The dog shifted slightly in bewilderment, Akamaru whined slightly as he rubbed his head against Kiba's leg again, silently asking his master what should they do now. There was silence for a time before Shino finally took a step forward, dispelling the tension in the air.

"Did you plan to cause such damage to Konoha when you first released the jutsu?" He asked calmly.

Hikari shook her head but she never looked up at the people talking to her. "No, My brother and I had planned to use the Jutsu to scare away the Akatsuki before quickly releasing it without endangering Konoha. However, the Akatsuki were persistent in staying in Konoha and continued to fight against us; and so - the longer we held the dragon in this plane of existence - the more we lost control of the jutsu. In the end, when the Akatsuki finally left, my brother had run out of all his chakra reserves for the summoning of the jutsu. The dragon was finally dispelled." She explained succinctly without mincing any words.

Kiba shifted from one leg to another. He had never dealt well with girls, especially forlorn looking girls like the one before him. Hikari was practically on her very knees begging for his forgiveness, Kiba couldn't have dredged up a snippet of anger against her at all. Even though he was still hurt, confused and slightly disorientated by all horror of the scene before him, but he couldn't fault her for her reasons to summon such a being in the first place. He had watched from a distance how Naruto faired against those mysteriously cloaked figures. If Hikari and her brother hadn't pulled something radically powerful like what they did, he highly doubted that there was anyone in Konoha that could beat the Akatsuki. Even the legendary Jiraiya and their Hokage were busy with Orochimaru on that giant snake some distance away, without them, there really was no one left in Konoha that could take on the Akatsuki.

Beside him, Shino gave the girl a tight nod in understanding before stepping back again and returning to his usual silent state. Glancing beside him at Shino, Kiba finally sighed in defeat before turning back to the girl before him. "Get up. I'm not gonna punch you or get revenge or anything like that. Just... just get up." Looking away quickly, Kiba took in a shuddering breath. "No one else would have the guts to pull whatever you guys did. And no one else would have gotten the results you guys got. You drove away the Akatsuki - something that I doubt Konoha would have been able to do by itself. For that, I thank you."

Shifting his sad but tolerant gaze back to the girl, who had finally looked up at him with calm but slightly confused eyes, he gave her a nod of acceptance and she gave him a tentative smile before shifting to her feet and standing up straight again. Her blank mask of an expression had returned firmly back onto her face, she stood stiffly like a stone statue next to her intended master. Naruto, too, had finally returned his attention to the dog boy and silent insect user.

He looked straight into their eyes, piercing their soles with his unwavering gaze. "Are you sure?" He finally asked after a moment of silence. "Are you sure you can forgive her for destroying your home?" He continued to force the issue.

Kiba turned his tired gaze to Naruto. "Orochimaru would have smashed Konoha to smithereens. Akatsuki wouldn't have cared as long as they get their hands on you. The way I see it, what they did was the only course of action – to protect both you and Konoha. What's left to forgive, Naruto?" For a usually active and arrogant, naïve boy, Kiba sure made a lot of sense with his comment. And with that last remark, Naruto dropped the issue completely by turning away and started walking towards another direction.

While avoiding intruding on the conversation between Kiba, Shino and Hikari previously, Naruto had spied a few of the haggard looking Medic Nins talking to each other some distance away. Reading their lips, Naruto figured that the Hokage had finally moved away from the makeshift hospital and back to the Hokage's tower to attend to an emergency council meeting of sort. It seemed his target had changed location and as such, Naruto too needed to change his destination in order to get in contact with Tsunade.

As he moved, Hikari and his two clones (still carrying the unconscious Koushiro and Mishizu) followed. Kiba shrugged to Shino before also turning and following Naruto towards where ever they were moving off to.

After a few hours of searching and walking around the ruined town centre of Konoha, Naruto and his small gang had met up with most of the Rookie 9 Genins. Sakura had joined them not long after, followed by Chouji and Ino. Lee and Tenten had turned up, followed lastly by a disgruntled looking Sasuke. The rest of the group, though still feeling uncomfortable around the once traitorous Uchiha, had pretty much put their differences aside when they saw he had attained a few injuries due to fighting against the Sound Nins and helping to protect Konoha in its time of need.

For each person they had met on their way, Naruto had Hikari land on her knees each and every time, begging each person for their forgiveness and giving them the chance to take their retribution for their destroyed home. However, to Naruto's surprise, none of them took up the chance to get their revenge.

Lee had sprouted something about the 'power of youth' and 'making mistakes' for a while before Tenten shut him up by punching him. In reply to Hikari's actions, Tenten had given a bow of respect of her own, saying that she respected Hikari for her courage and power. "There was nothing to forgive." She simply stated.

Chouji and Ino had mostly forgiven Hikari even without purposely trying. Both their family members and homes had remained intact, making them feel enough guilt to not place their hurt and frustrations on anyone else.

Sakura had remained silent for a bit before acknowledging Hikari's strength and saying that 'if it was the only way,' she would accept that. Sasuke had simply grunted and turned away. He had no right to place any judgement on another; after all, he was still on trial for treason due to his willingness to leave the village for power.

Eventually, Naruto reached his destination – the dilapidated looking Hokage Tower where most of the councillors and clan heads had gathered to discuss Konoha's future plans.

Pushing through the half hanging doors, Naruto calmly barged his way into the meeting room with the elders and clan heads. The rest of the Rookie 9 genins, Hikari, Koushiro, Mishizu and the two clones followed without a word. Upon entering the rather chaotic room, Naruto and the others were bombarded by the wave of voices all shouting over one another.

"What about our food storage and resources? Is there even enough to last us for even a week?"

"First thing first, we have to rebuild Konoha!"

"This is worse than what happened during the Chuunin Exam!"

"Security should be our first priority!"

"No, our first priority is to our citizens, we have to give them a place to live, some sort of shelter. We can't ask them to live on the ruined streets!"

"MY PRIORITY IS TO THE WOUNDED AND INJURED!" The Hokage's voice rang out above all the over voices. "What has been destroyed can always be rebuilt in time. What has been lost can once again be replaced, EXCEPT human lives!"

"What do you suggest then, Hokage-sama? If we concentrate all our efforts on the injured and the dying, then what about the living! Do we leave them to fend for themselves?" Hyuuga Hiashi stood up from his once seated position and gazed piercingly at the Tsunade.

But before Tsunade could properly retort back, Naruto interrupted her. "We should separate and segment our forces to deal with the different issues. That way we can work our way slowly up. Form an emergency committee with the heads for the different departments – one for ongoing ninja missions, one for the health on the sickly and injured, one for reconstruction, one for food reserves, one for security and so on and so forth. Don't tell me you've never faced a

state emergency before." Naruto taunted all the councillors and clan elders back with a confident smirk.

Before any of the angered councillors could snap at the lowly Chuunin, Hiashi answered Naruto's comments with one of his own. "It's not that we've never faced a state emergency before. It's just that we've never faced a situation at such a scale. We've probably lost close to half of our civilian population and up to a third of our entire ninja assembly, and that's only because close to half of those numbers are currently outside of Konoha on missions and won't be returning for a while yet. On top of that, we don't have enough food, water, and shelter to last us even a week. It's certainly been a while since Konoha had faced such dire circumstances."

Naruto shifted his gaze to the only Chuunin that had been present inside the room before his arrival. "Shika?" He pressed the boy to add in his two cents worth.

Shikamaru sighed heavily and sat up straighter from his slumped posture. "This is so troublesome." He murmured before panning his gaze around the crowded room. "Naruto's right. We really should subdivide our attention into different areas of focus. There will be one central committee of management, the members selected on that committee will oversee a particular area each, and all the committee members should meet at a weekly basis (at least) to report their progress and developments. There should be at least one person in charge of managing the incoming and outgoing Shinobi missions, as that's our main source of income. There should be others as Naruto suggested and probably one or two dedicated people to coordinate the resources among all the committee members." Pausing a bit in his explanation, Shikamaru concluded with: "It's really the best and most effective solution."

"And why should we, the council heads, listen to two newly established Chuunins?" One of the larger sized clan head shouted out pompously.

Shikamaru sighed in the background. Hikari glared and took one menacing step forward before Naruto pulled her back. Even though she had been pulled back by Naruto-sama, it still didn't calm Hikari's rage. Ice blue eyes pierced directly into the very being of the outspoken clansman. "Be very careful of your words in front of representatives from the Air village. It would not be beneficial to you when you insult Naruto-sama directly in front of members of the Gate Guardians." Her calm voice sliced through the murmuring atmosphere like a swinging sword. It is then that the whole assemble of councillors, Hokage and clans representatives all felt a general drop in temperature in the room.

"Enough. Hikari." Naruto demanded. And just like that, the temperature rose to its normal room temperature once more. Sighing and shaking his head in exasperation, Naruto turned his attention back to the assembly. "Forgive my subordinate for her outburst. She has no right to speak in such a tone." He apologised formally in front of the clan heads, which only shamed and infuriated Hikari even more.

"Gate Guardians? I see, so that's why there were so many high level jutsus appearing in Konoha?" Tsunade murmured in realisation, her eyes moving up and down the three (two unconscious) new forms behind Naruto.

"You mean to tell me that it was the KUUNOKI'S fault that we are suffering as we are!" An infuriated councillor shouted in shock.

Before any more outbursts can follow that exclamation, Jiraiya (who had been standing in a far corner of the room) jumped the foray. "Councillor Kurosaki! We are not here to place blame on anyone or anything! What we have to do now is to move on and think about HOW to get Konoha back on its feet. And I for one think that the idea of the Uzumaki Heir has merit. Unless you can come up with something better, I suggest you shut up and sit down!" Jiraiya growled out in his most menacing voice, which resulting in half the councillors snapping their jaws shut in an instant.

Sighing heavily, Tsunade brought the discussion back to the original issue. "All right people! Let's go back to the original issue here! What we have is a situation that Konoha hasn't faced since the days of war. We have lost a large number of human lives, infrastructure, food and monetary resources. What we must do is discuss where we go from here!"

The discussions for various plans were laid out, debated, counter-debated, and so on and so forth before everyone finally settled on a single path to take. All the genins had been ushered out of the room sometime in the beginning of the discussions. Naruto and Shikamaru were the only exceptions – being the only two practically invited into the discussion by the Hokage and Jiraiya respectively. Sakura, Ino and Chouji had been lead away by Shizune to help out at the make shift hospital with some of the injured. Kiba, Shino, Lee, Tenten and Sasuke had all left to help out the civilians or basically wander around looking for anything they can do. Even Hikari, and the two clones carrying Koushiro and Mishizu had been ushered out of the meeting room. The clones had taken the unconscious duo away to a safe place for them to rest while Hikari had adamantly refused to leave her master unaided. Instead, she and Naruto had come to a compromise; she would stay out of the room but remain outside the door until Naruto made an appearance.

As the prolonged negotiations continued long into the night, both Shikamaru and Naruto were thrown into the deep end of the word 'politics'. Never had they experienced such a term in such depth until this moment; the situation simply awed and infuriated them at the same time.

Who cared why some people didn't get along with each other due to some obscure past incident that still had influence over today's standing. Why they couldn't just ask Sunagakura (the Hidden Sand Village) for help was beyond Naruto and Shikamaru. Sure, the Sand had once attacked Konoha, but that was under the manipulation of Orochimaru and the Sound. Hadn't these people ever heard of the phrase – 'the enemy of your enemy is your friend'?

And on top of that, there were several humorous yet ridiculous stories on how some of the councillors have previously had dealings with Fire Nation's Daimyous (Lords). These negative past relationship will only hinder the recuperation proceedings of Konoha if the involved parties DON'T put their differences aside and work towards a shared goal. This was a crisis situation; there was no room for pride and prejudice.

It was a very long night indeed for both Chuunins. The only good thing that Naruto and Shikamaru had taken out of the night was that they had been able to deflate a few of the massive egos in the room, which was the only entertaining factor through out the night.

By dawn the next day, everyone was tired and pretty much in an agreeable mood. Anything said was passed with very little debate and soon a working party of representatives had been sworn into office. The Hokage would still be in charge of Ninja missions, supported by her subordinates Umino Iruka, Hagane Kotetsu and Kamizuki Izumo (1); Shizune was charged with the smooth running of the temporary hospital as well as the general health of all citizens with Haku as her main support person. The Anbu had been all called back to secure the boundaries of Konoha, with some of the Gate Guardians as support – volunteered by Naruto of course. The Jounins and Chuunins would focus mainly on Ninja operations outside of the village to bring back as much income as they possibly could. That just left the Genins and a few Academic teachers, special Jounins and retired Shinobis in the village to help redevelop the area. Once again, Naruto had volunteered the services of the Gate Guardians without their consent as he felt that they needed to rebuild all that they had destroyed.

Lastly, just before the meeting adjourned, Shikamaru asked an interesting question to the richer clan heads and councillors. "Everyone knows about the financial vulnerability Konoha is in right now, what are you rich clansman and councillors gonna do about it?"

The ensuing silence was deafening. Every one could feel the pressure upon their shoulders to show that they truly were willing to

put in some time, effort and resources into the rebuilding of Konoha, the question was just on how much. Finally, Jiraiya stepped forward. "As the renowned author of Icha Icha Paradise, I proclaim that over half of the money earned by my books will be put into the rebuilding of Konoha." And just like that, the other clans of Konoha had no choice but to follow unless they wished to let it be known that they weren't willing to support their home as much as others. Hiashi proclaimed that he would place in half the monetary assets of the Hyuuga clan, and soon the other clans followed, each dedicating between a third to almost half their own monetary assets into the redevelopment of Konoha, depending on how financially stable they themselves were.

Once the meeting had ended, everyone sluggishly left the room, only leaving behind the Hokage, Jiraiya, Naruto and Shikamaru. When all the people were out of the way, Naruto finally had the chance to ask Tsunade his own request. "Hokage-sama. I would like to request that I be taken out of mission-ready status and remain in Konoha for the undetermined future."

Tsunade's eyes crinkled in confusions. "Why's that, Naruto? You're official rank is Chuunin now, and as you are not of a special field – like the Medic field – I can't simply just take you out of active status without a reason." She asked gently.

Naruto sighed and shrugged his shoulders a bit. "I know that. But if you really want the Gate Guardian's help, then I'm going to have to remain here and keep an eye on them. They won't listen to you Tsunade even if you were my grandmother's disciples. The only person they would willingly take orders from is either Aunt Ruri or me. And that's only IF I stay in close contact and watch them closely. You know what the Kuunoki are like..." Naruto continued to mumble as his speech prolonged.

Tsunade's eyes glazed slightly as she remembered a time when she had spend some years studying under Rika-sensei's tutelage. Indeed, she had not forgotten the perpetual disregard the Kuunoki people had for the outside world. If it were not a direct order from

either the 7 councillors or the Uzumaki master, then they would not interfere – as is their nature. Their philosophy – why should we get involved with something that does not concern us? Even more ideological – why should we get involved in the first place if in the end, time destroys all our effort anyway?

Sighing heavily, Tsunade turned her gaze back to Naruto. "I understand, I'll have a confirmation letter for you tomorrow detailing that you are to stay within the borders of Konoha for an undetermined future. However, at the same time as your stay, you and Shikamaru will be helping me with the planning and procedure of the redevelopment, understand?"

Naruto only nodded firmly while Shikamaru sighed, shoulders slumping despondently. "This is **so** troublesome..."

After Naruto left the Hokage's office, Hikari instantly met him at the door. It seemed that she had stayed outside for the entire night, just waiting for Naruto's return. They then left the Hokage's premises silently, never speaking a single word to each other.

After a long walk in the almost desolate streets, Naruto finally reached his old, half demolished home. The stairs were rickety as some of the steps had been broken, and when he reached his room he found himself with a whole new window, an incredibly large one that took up an entire side wall with half of his bed hanging off the broken concrete floor. Shaking his head, Naruto moved to his hidden wall cabinet behind the wooden trunk he had kept to the other side of his room. Opening the hidden cabinet, he took out his precious items within its makeshift box – inside were his father's scroll, mother's amulet and Elle's old, dried flowers. This was all he needed to survive; they were all the memories he required to live on.

Looking around the room once more, he ordered Hikari to clean up the place. If she found anything worth saving she was to put it into a wooden trunk and anything that could be salvaged was to put into its own pile. He would go over them later and pick out the ones that

could go to charity, to help the needy or to the temporary hospital. After all, everyone was going to be in need of tents for temporary shelters, food, blankets and warm clothes. If there was anything he had that could help even a little, then he was willing to part with it.

Leaving Hikari to her task, Naruto walked out of his apartment building with his box of precious items in hand, only to meet Katana, Tori and Akiko right outside. It seemed that they had sense him some time ago and were awaiting his orders. Now that Hikari has her own job to do, he would have to have another bodyguard beside him.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Naruto turned to Akiko and Tori first. "The two of you, go find a clearing big enough to house a plantation of new trees for the reconstruction of Konoha. I know this will drain you of a lot of Chakra, but I need you to do this. Use 'Mokudon: Jyu Kai Kou Dan' (Wood Element: Forest Genesis) (2) to force the tree's growth, I'm sure you know how to use that technique, right?"

Tori's wide-eyed expression betrayed his feelings about using that particular technique but he nodded none the less to Naruto's commands. Akiko only shifted her uncertain gaze between Naruto and Tori. She guessed that she was only involved because out of all the Gate Guardians, she had the most chakra capacity while Tori had the best control when it came to Earth element techniques.

"Right, hop to it." Naruto ordered and the two slightly confused but considerably fearful members of the Gate Guardian group disappeared in a blink of an eye. It was not like Naruto could possibly hurt any of them or anything like that. On the contrary, they were probably more fearful of what Ruri would say and do to them if they didn't obey Naruto. But more than that, they respect him because of his position as the Uzumaki heir.

Once Tori and Akiko were gone, that left only Katana beside Naruto. Ignoring the short boy's presence for now, Naruto moved off to see if there was anything he could do to help. He knew that it was the Gate Guardian's policy to always have at least one member with him at all

times, so there was no point in asking Katana to leave. He just wished he could have been hooked up with someone more sociable instead of the anti-social, bloodthirsty, sometimes psychotic ten-year-old boy.

"OI! NARUTO-NIISAN!" Abruptly brought out of his musings, Naruto glanced to his side only to see Konohamaru run up to him with the rest of his friends (Udon and Moegi) tagging along. "Hi! Niisan! I haven't seen you in a long while!" Konohamaru's grin widened exponentially in an obviously forced smile, but his attention soon shifted to the short, silent figure standing behind Naruto. "So, who's the short kid next to you?"

Less than a split second later, Konohamaru found himself pushed to the ground with Naruto standing over him, both hands blocking the still sheathed swords of the brown haired boy that once stood behind Naruto. "WHO ARE YOU CALLING **SHORT** ? YOU PIPSQUEK OF A **BEAN** !" The infuriated boy ranted even while waving his hands around, sheathed swords swinging in the air wildly, attempting to dodge Naruto as best he could.

The entire scene would have been comical if it had been under a different situation; that was, if Konoha was still standing and its people actually able to take a joke. But in this case, the scene was simply unwelcomed and definitely a deterrent for the anguished moods of people. Naruto knew this, so he did his best to resolve the situation before it could erupt into a real physical attack.

Shocked beyond silence, Konohamaru could only watch as Naruto had to forcibly drag the boy away, who still waved and struggled like a madman. "ENOUGH! Katana! Cool down NOW!" Naruto called out as best as he could with his arms busy keeping Katana at bay. Slowly but surely, the boy in his arms settled down and soon enough, Naruto released him. Katana still glared fiercely at the young children before him, who was now shaking in growing fear.

Sighing heavily, Naruto moved to comfort Konohamaru and his friends as best he could. "Gomen ne (Sorry), Konohamaru, Udon,

Moegi. This is Katana; you could say he's my bodyguard for now. But uh... he's a bit... uh..." Kneeling on the ground and lowering his head so that he was close to the children, Naruto whispered in secrecy. "He's a bit sensitive about his height, so... please don't say anything about that particular subject when you're in his presence."

Helping the still stunned boy up, Naruto patted some of the dust and dirt away before he finally stood up again. "And I'm sorry, guys, but I'm going to go help out with the clean up. As a Chuunin, it's the least I can do. Why don't you guys go back to the Academy? Even though there's probably no school today I think at least the Academy teachers will have something for you all to do. Alright? Take care of yourself and once again, I'm sorry for Katana's behaviour." With that said, Naruto slowly turned away and started moving off again.

He was tired, he knew it but his guilt and sense of responsibility wouldn't let him rest just yet. He just didn't want to think at the moment.

Like a zombie, Naruto made his way through and around the destroyed parts of Konoha, helping to set up hundreds of temporary tents, acting as shelters for the civilians. At one point, he found himself digging giant holes in a desolate part of the village, before dumping forth the hundreds of bodies that had piled up since the day before. A mass burial was all the enemies truly deserved. As for their own dead, they had to be painstakingly identified in the makeshift morgue, covered and kept frozen to stop any decomposition, just so that they could be properly mourned in two days time – that was the date Tsunade had decided to be the national mourning day for this second disaster.

As he worked, Naruto also heard from the higher-up officials that word had already been spread to the Hidden Sand and their allies had sent an envoy of Shinobis and aid to help. Other smaller villages like the Hidden Waterfall and loyal countries around Konoha had also expressed their sympathies and had pledge to aid them in their need. One of the councillors had been in contact with a few of the Daimyos and Lords of Fire country, all pledging a certain amount of

aid to be coming forth in the next few days as well. The aid would come; it was just going to take a while.

Numb to his very soul, Naruto trotted along, doing whatever it was required of him to do. He even forced the available Gate Guardians into doing their own bit to help. Seiko had been forced into helping out in the hospital for an undetermined amount of time, healing the injured, sick and old. She was also told (under no uncertain terms) to prepare for vaccination and medical equipment, ensuring that disease didn't spread in this time of desperate need.

Jubei had been dragged into helping the villagers attain more clean water by using his rings to 'transport' water from a far away dam into local wells so that clean water was accessible to everyone. Maya had been coaxing the wildlife in the surrounding forests of Konoha to come back to the area as they had all ran away in fright of Orochimaru's army. Yami had been helping the locals with ensuring the general infrastructure of Konoha could be sustained – mainly, the underground sewerage system, electrical towers, water pipes, gas pipes, roads, communication towers and other assorted necessities.

As he worked slowly, Naruto knew the shock was slowly sinking into his body but he refused to acknowledge that fact, not until he collapsed from exhaustion anyway.

Days passed in slow a drizzle of mundane work and flat emotions. The aid and support from other countries, villages and daimiyos came, helping in the general aid effort of Konoha. Every single Jounin and most of the Chuunin were out of the village, working double their shifts in order to attain income for Konoha to regrow back into its original strengths. The Anbu quickly and effectively resecured the borders of Konoha. With the help of a few Gate Guardians at a time, they were able to fight back against any potential hostile enemies as well as drive out local gangs taking advantage of the situation. The Genins and Academy students were all employed into working to reconstruct Konoha.

On the third day after the invasion, Konoha held a national day of mourning for all those who had died and had their names carved into the heroes stone in remembrance of their bravery. Tsunade pledged that never again would Konoha suffer such a loss, never again would the Leaf show itself in such a weakened state. The enemies had tried to take Konoha down, not once but twice, and twice their plans were foiled. The spirit of fire still lived on. It would continue to live on.

After the inspirational speech in which Naruto remembered very little, everyone returned back to work. Shikamaru never left Tsunade's side for long, acting as a necessary advisor and proving himself to be an incredible asset in times as these. Sakura hardly ever left the hospital anymore. Everyday, there was a new case of someone getting sick from drinking dirty water or someone came in with an injury sustained by doing manual labour they weren't use to. Everyone was busy but at least the pain wasn't as fresh as it had once been, the memories weren't as clear and as hostile as they once were. People moved on, even if they had to force themselves, they pushed away the pain and heartache, concentrating on what they could do now instead of thinking what could have been. Time went on, and so to did the human heart.

Slowly but surely, the number of ragged looking tents were replaced by newly built homes of brick, stone and wood. Plantation upon plantation of timber forests were forced into existence by the continual exertion of Tori, Katana, Akiko and the reawakened Mishizu. The trees were then chopped down and converted into wooden planks to be used for housing, building bridges and other furnitures. Hikari and Koushiro were handling the bulk of the construction work, but both were content with 'rebuilding' something of which they had once destroyed. It was probably the only way that they would realise how much harder it was to create things rather than destroy them.

The once Rookie nine Genins (Naruto, Sakura and Shikamaru exempted) and Gai's team took turns in undertaking missions under the orders of the Hokage as well as taking part in the reconstruction

work. They had all been recognised as some of Konoha's youngest and brightest, with a great future ahead of them. With this expectation came a lot of responsibility. Sasuke was the only one not treated with such faith. He still helped out with the reconstruction but he had to be in the presence of an Anbu at all times.

Weeks upon mind-numbing weeks passed and before anyone truly noticed, almost 3 months had passed since the attempted destruction of the Hidden Leaf village. Most of the buildings (public housing and general infrastructure) were finished and all the civilians and Shinobis alike had some place concrete to call their home, at least for the time being. However, most of the people doing the majority of the work were also exhausted, Naruto and the Gate Guardians included.

None of them had taken any real breaks in these past months. They had just been pouring their all their energy, Chakra and effort into the reconstruction work. If it wasn't Naruto using Kage Bunshin to increase the amount of man power available, it was Tori growing more trees with the 'Mokudon: Jyu Kai Kou Dan' (Wood Element: Forest Genesis), or it was Seiko developing new and improved ways to vaccinate people as well as other cures for severe burns or cell regeneration techniques to help incapacitated ninjas regrow new limbs.

Simply put, the amount and quality of work done by this small group of people rivalled almost all the Anbu's job added together. Watching Naruto become skinnier as the days passed by, Tsunade eventually ordered him and the rest of the Gate Guardians to take a few days off. Most of the reconstruction work was finished, and thanks to the multiple avenues of aid arriving from all over the world, as well as their own Daimyos, Fire Country Lords and rich Clan members, Konoha wasn't doing too badly financially. It would be able to get back on its feet and support itself once again, proving to the world that Konoha wasn't so easy to be ruined.

Finally giving in to his own mental, emotional and physical exhaustion, coupled with a sleep pill handed to him by Seiko, Naruto

literary slept for three days straight. It wasn't until the third day that Naruto awakened to mumbled voices outside his room in his new apartment in a newly built public housing complex.

Yawning, stretching and basically completing the waking up ritual, Naruto got up and slowly made his way to his living room, of which he was sure was the origin of all the noise. Upon entering the room, Naruto was surprised to see none other than Uchiha Sasuke sitting on his small table in the sparse room, glaring furiously at his bodyguard of the day – Koushiro. Realising that his presence hadn't been noticed by the other two, Naruto remained content to just watch and listen to what was going on at the moment before deciding what to do further.

"Look. It's not that hard. Just wake him up by telling him I need to speak to him. That's all!" Sasuke growled out in a threatening manner.

"Geese man. What part of '**no**' do you NOT get! Naruto-sama is exhausted and I'm certainly not going to interrupt his beauty sleep. So lay off man. Give the guy some space!" Koushiro threatened back, seemingly unimpressed by the Uchiha's act of childishness.

"We've given him space for close to 3 months now. He never attends any of the get-togethers that we organise! He never visits us anymore! And when we do try to visit him, he's never home! It's almost as if he's cutting himself off from the rest of us now that you guys have arrived. Each time we see him, he just turns around and continues to work on whatever he was doing before, completely ignoring our presence! If that isn't avoiding us, then I don't know WHAT is!" Sasuke snarled in retaliation.

Before Koushiro could physically harm the Uchiha or verbally retort back, Naruto interrupted the conversation. "Is that why you're here, Sasuke? To scold me for not being in touch with the rest of the Rookie Nine for the last few weeks?" Naruto asked in a gentle voice, his mind quickly going over the past few months and he was surprised to find that he had indeed neglected many of his Konoha

friends. But that wasn't because he was intentionally avoiding them exactly. He just didn't want any conflict between his new friends and the Gate Guardians. At the same time however, he was also too emotionally worn out that he didn't put much effort into anything other than work.

"Naruto!" Sasuke exclaimed in surprise before quickly masking his facial expressions so that he was back to the brooding look. "I only came here to inform you that the rest of us have a get-together planned this afternoon at around 2pm, we've also invited Gai's team as well. We're meeting atop the Hokage Monument's head and the rest of the guys have invited you to come along. Now, are you too good to join us or what?" Sasuke sneered in irritation, completely misunderstanding Naruto's reluctance to join them as a sign of superiority towards the others.

After a moment's thought, Naruto decided. "I'll come. Do you mind if I bring some of the Gate Guardians as well? I can't leave home without them following me anyway. It's a bit of a hassle going outside and stuff but..." He shrugged. "Nothing I can do about it, so I've gotten use to it."

Surprised at Naruto's explanation, Sasuke nodded tightly to the first question. With his errand done, he quickly stood up, made a small sign of leaving and just walked out the door without another word. He definitely wasn't going to treat his ex-teammate any differently than when they had first met but at least the tension between the two once-rivals had lessened into companionable atmosphere and that was all that was needed between the two. Though never officially friends, the two had come to an understanding of sort.

Naruto smiled slightly as he watched the Uchiha leave his apartment. Mentally, he was honest enough to admit that he missed his old team as well as his other friends. He hadn't had any opportunity to sit down and talk to Sakura and Sasuke for a many months now, let alone do anything else. The only one he had been in contact with for the last few weeks would have been Shikamaru and

that was only because he had to make weekly reports to the Hokage about what the Gate Guardians had done reconstruction wise.

/ Well, better get ready for this get-together thing. / With that thought, Naruto told Koushiro to gather the rest of the Gate Guardians immediately. He would have to have a talk with all of them about proper behaviour and respect demonstrated to his peers prior to the actual event. He was especially worried about how Jubei would treat certain members of the Hyuuga family, but mentally crossed his fingers and hope that everything went well. He was tired of always juggling the aspects of these two worlds – his life as the Uzumaki heir in Kuunoki and his life as a normal Shinobi here in Konoha. Now, he had decided to try and merge the two worlds together. After all, he belonged in both worlds so he would need to find a certain peace between them.

(End)

(1) Hagane Kotetsu is the Chuunin with the strange white strip across his nose and Kamizuki Izumo is his partner. They're the two you always see carrying huge stacks of paper for Tsunade in the anime series.

(2) This is the jutsu the First Hokage used against the Third Hokage during the Sound invasion of the Leaf, where Orochimaru summoned both the first and second Hokage to fight for him.

This chapter didn't really have much essence in it. It held a lot of opinions as well as my own experiences trying to adapt two different environments and experiences together. I hope I've captured the true devastation and emotional turmoil that people face after such traumatic events though I admit I fast forwarded the reconstruction phase by a lot – most places need years and years to get back on its feet but I've pushed it to a mere 3 months. Not sure whether that is believable or not, but it's already done.

I'm not really happy with chapter but I've been slowly losing inspiration as the story progressed so far. Since I've had no prior experience enduring a war of any sort, I hope that none of you (readers) are offended by my descriptions. I'll try to concentrate more on the interactions between Naruto, the Gate Guardians and his friends in Konoha next chapter.

Anyway, please read and review.

The following is regarding a remark made by one of the reviewers about the Dokudes blood that still flows in Naruto's body and why it hasn't been activated yet.

If you look at the generation guideline for the Uzumaki tree at my website, you will see that it was Naruto's great grandmother who was a Dokudes (Rika, Naruto's grandmother, is therefore a half breed, Yuuki – Naruto's mother, is a quarter breed and yes, Naruto is one-eighth Dokudes). The Dokudes blood within a Uzumaki doesn't really appear much (Rika being the only exception) because their Uzumaki bloodline is dominant.

Friends?

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Seventeen: Friends?

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: OOC for a few characters, building on the relationships and personalities between my original characters and the cannon ones. I will be giving out more backgrounds on the various characters from this point forth, especially regarding the Hyuuga main house members. For those of you who have already read the profile of Jubei from my website, please keep the secret to yourself and don't spoil it for the other readers. Hope you all enjoy!

Chapter 17

It took Naruto longer than expected to convince all the Gate Guardians to come along to the get-together. Outgoing and sociable members of the guardians such as Akiko and Tori jumped at the chance to get acquainted with people of Konoha but less sociable people like Yami, Seiko and Jubei find it rather detestable, especially considering there are two Hyuuga's belonging into Naruto's group of friends. Others don't really have an opinion, such as Hikari, Koushiro and Mishizu. Katana is willing to go as long as long as Tori was going, and Maya seems to be happy with the invite though she was still rather shy to admit it out loud.

When 2pm finally arrived, Naruto found himself as his group of followers trudging along the newly constructed streets of Konoha, counting every step they took on the way towards the Hokage's monument. Upon arriving at the designated site, the sight that met Naruto certainly didn't help release any of the tension that had been building up since Sasuke's visit earlier that morning.

The group of eleven, all the once Rookie Nine Genins plus Gai's team, sat in a three quarter circle all awaiting his arrival. Most looked to be rather tense as Naruto walked closer towards the group. When he finally reached a distance of ten feet from the group, Naruto slowed down his step slightly before bowing and asking politely. "Um... Hi guys. Mind if I sat down with the guards from Kuunoki?" He asked the question timidly, mentally afraid that they would reject him now that they knew of his so-called important status.

This is one of the reasons why he didn't have any friends while he lived in the Kuunoki. Some had feared him due to his relations with the Uzumaki, some had looked down on him because he hadn't signed the contract to become the Uzumaki heir, while more respected him for his ancestry. All in all, there were many distant admirers and people interested in his growth, but none of them had taken the effort to truly get to know him. None of them had approached him from a friend's point of view. And considering he was still suffering from the loss of Elle at the time, Naruto didn't try very hard to make new friends either. But here in Konoha, when not many people know of his heritage and even less people cared of his so called status, he truly felt at home, free from the pressures of the Kuunoki.

When Naruto finally saw most of them give him a smile and a nod in reply, he felt a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He hadn't lost his friends; he hadn't pushed them so far that they wouldn't welcome his return. However, before his relief could overwhelm him, an innocent question was voiced out. "Who are those behind you, Naruto? I believe I have heard of them, but have never met them directly." Neji spoke up, calmly hiding his curiosity

about the only male figure with a striking resemblance to all Hyuugas, hiding somewhere in the distance on top of a tree. Though the suspicious looking man wasn't directly following Naruto like the rest of the Gate Guardians, it was still pretty obvious that he had followed Naruto into the clearing as he wasn't there a second ago.

/ Shit! / Naruto swore mentally. Of course Neji and Hinata hadn't seen any of the Gate Guardians, and especially not Jubei. He had purposely told them NOT to get in contact with any one from the Hyuuga clan, just so that he could ensure no break out of violence occurs. */ Now how the hell can I explain this? /* Naruto frantically thought to himself, even while he calmly replied to Neji's questions.

"Behind me are my subordinates from the Hidden Air Village, these are the 10 Gate Guardians of the Kuunoki. On my far right is Kazeha Akiko." Said girl jumped up and stood in a special pose – right hand out in a sign of 'peace', legs standing slightly apart, left hand holding onto the tip of the giant boomerang strapped to her back, and smiling brightly at the group of Genins and Chuunins. She would have yelled out in reply too but that would embarrass Naruto too much as she had done so in the last few weeks.

"The dark clad boy next to her is Shinzo Yami." Said boy watched the others with unblinking violet eyes, completely blank of all expression. Kiba shivered slightly at his purple eyes gazing vacantly at everyone, the gaze just looks so dead and lifeless it was almost eerie. And not to mention the slightly older boy's pale white skin only further enhanced Yami's looks as a dead corpse – pale and cold.

"The bandaged girl next to Yami is his cousin, Oniyoubu Maya." The only physical features able to be seen on this girl's entire body would be her hands and eyes. Maya gave all of Naruto's Leaf friends a polite bow and shuffled closer to her cousin as if in fright of all the attention. She was definitely not use to crowds and especially crowds of strangers she had never really met before.

"The two brats beside her are Kataichi Tori and Ryuji Katana." The spiky, brown haired boy waved good-naturedly at the rest of the

gang while his friend, of whom he had a casual arm over, glared at them in an intimidating manner.

"Next to them are the twins, Raitei Hikari and Raitei Koushiro." Hikari gave them a gentle smile as she had already met most of them some weeks ago. Koushiro, on the other hand, raised a single hand and spoke out with a bland: "Yo," as a greeting, almost imitating Kakashi's normal greeting perfectly.

"The quiet blue haired girl is Kaiba Mishizu." Said girl bowed respectively before returning with her own quiet: "Pleasure to meet you all."

"The young one next to Mishizu is Dokudes Seiko." Similar in attitude to Katana, Seiko sneered at the rest of the Konoha Chuunins and Genins, as if they were beneath her in every possible way and she detested being in their presence, which was partly true. Seiko had never been a very sociable person considering she had been spoilt unnecessarily as a child and then being placed a whole world of pressure on her shoulders. She is decidedly not a stable individual, similar in character to Gaara, just not as psychotic in nature.

Naruto gave a heavy sigh as he discovered he couldn't find the last member of the Gate Guardians beside him. "And I suppose I should introduce the last member of the team whom is probably hiding somewhere behind me, right?" He asked nonchalantly without ever turning around to make sure he was right.

The others however – Sasuke, Sakura, Chouji and Kiba – stretched to the side slightly and discovered that Naruto was correct. There was one last figure sitting on top of a large tree branch some distance away. From that distance, they couldn't make out much of the person's features, but that was no problem for Neji and Hinata, who had noticed the young man some time ago but were too polite to ask directly why he was located so far away while the rest of the group were right in front of them.

"That guy is called Dokudes Jubei and he's in a pissy mood at the moment so lets just not disturb him, okay?" Naruto expressed in a tired manner, shoulders shrugging and leaving behind a heavy silence from the rest of the Gate Guardians.

"Dokudes?" Neji inquired in a quiet voice. He was just about to ask Naruto why the man had white eyes exactly the same as the Hyuuga bloodline limit but was abruptly brushed off by Naruto's next question, seemingly trying to avoid any conflict.

"Well then. Why don't we sit around in a circle and then introduce each other similarly to how we introduced each other when we first formed our Genin teams. Likes, dislikes and goals in life, stuff like that." All the groups' members had considered this a good idea and so, followed Naruto's suggestion and sat in a complete circle. For Naruto's benefit, they were making an effort to get to know one another instead of just remaining in their two opposing groups and probably giving Naruto a migraine trying to relate the groups to one another on an individual basis.

"I guess I'll start then." Naruto volunteered. "My name is Uzumaki Naruto. I am the heir to the Uzumaki family line and probably future ruler of the Kuunoki. My only living relative left is my Aunt Ruri, who is the current sovereign of the Hidden Air Village. I like... my friends, my family, my home and... I guess my favourite food is ramen. I don't really... dislike anything. I have... my dream is to become the Hokage and protect this village. I also... have another goal in my life... which is to set my Aunt free of the responsibilities of governing the Hidden Air Village. My ambition is to change the Hidden Air village from its old ways. (1)"

Nodding succinctly, Naruto looked to the others for any volunteers. When no one raise up their hands with questions, Naruto decided to choose his next victim. "Okay, Shikamaru, this time you go."

Shikamaru sighed. "How troublesome. Well, my name is Nara Shikamaru. I dislike troublesome things and women in general – they're just too troublesome for their own good." Here he paused

while a few male friends snickered and the rest of the female population glared at him heatedly. He decided to ignore their glares and continue on with his description. "I like watching the clouds in the sky, play Shogi and Go, and basically doing nothing else other than sleep. My goal in life... is to become a so-so ninja, and earn an okay salary." Shikamaru looked up at the sky with a glazed expression on his face. "Mary a regular girl who would be neither a beauty or a hag. Have two kids – first a girl then a boy. Then I'd retire early when my daughter gets married and my son becomes independent, and spend the rest of my days playing Shogi and Go."

"Man! You're boring!" A loud exclamation was voiced after Shikamaru's explanation on his life's dream.

Shikamaru looked at Koushiro with a bored expression – the one who made the exclamation in the first place. "If you think you're so interesting then you go next." Sighing again, Shikamaru muttered to himself. "How troublesome."

"Me? Go next? Okay!" Koushiro jumped at the opportunity to go first. He was never really a shy of the limelight kind of guy but he wasn't desperate for attention either. "My name, as you already know, is Raitei Koushiro. My mom's an ex-Cloud Nin while my dad's an Air Nin. My sis and I are the first heirs of the 'Raitei' clan – the Lightning emperors. As for my likes, I'm your typical guy, I guess. I like fighting strong opponents and beating my sister whenever I can." Here he paused and gave Hikari a self-indulgent smirk while his sister glared at him. "I like using flashy jutsus to impress people even if they're a little over the top. I like having fun when I'm allowed and experimenting with new stuff."

Here, his tone changed slightly, becoming less cheerful and more serious. "I dislike people who taunt my sis and think they can get away with it. Anyone who looks down upon the Hidden Air village will get their due. I can't stand arrogant assholes that think they can rule the world. (2)" A slight pause again for Koushiro to shift his mind back to the more cheerful side of things. "As for my goals in life... Well, if I ever get the chance, I'd like to travel the world one day. But

for now, I'd settle for becoming a good subordinate to both Ruri-sama and Naruto-sama."

A long period of silence followed Koushiro's introduction. This is because all the Leaf Ninjas were trying to digest the information he had just given them so abruptly. All the Leaf Nins had no idea about the complex politics that exist in the Hidden Air village and so they didn't quite understand why Koushiro had to express that his mother was an ex-Cloud Nin while his father was an Air Nin, as well as the explanation that he and his sister were the first generation of this newly built clan – the Raitei.

What they didn't know was that most people of mixed bloodlines are looked down upon slightly in the Hidden Air village even though they were a necessity for the village to survive. This is because after hundreds of years of in breeding, the Kuunoki were unable to sustain their own unique bloodlines due to the multiple diseases and cell mutations that kill off their young. After generations of suffering, the Kuunoki slowly opened their doors to let their citizens go out and find outside blood to mix with in order to survive. This then created a second class of citizens – those of the mixed blood.

The mixed blood clans were originally disregarded until they can prove themselves to be a strong clan. Clans such as the Raitei and the Kaibas are mixed blood clans. They are constantly put under pressure by the Seven Councillors to out-perform their original pureblood counterparts that have always existed in the Hidden Air village – like the Dokudes and the Oniyoubu.

Other clans facing extinction have chosen adoption of outside orphans to become their prodigies instead of creating mixed blood clans. These adopted children face the same type of prejudice as the mixed blood clans. Examples like Katana and Akiko, being adopted members of their clans also have to prove themselves to be strong Ninjas in order to withstand the harsh treatments by the Kuunoki elders.

However, all this politics was beyond the understanding of the Leaf Genins and Chuunins (with Shikamaru probably being the only exception) and so, Naruto asked Koushiro to pick the next person to talk. Koushiro randomly selected a person opposite of him, which just so happen to be Rock Lee. The other Leaf Nins cringed at Koushiro's choice but didn't say anything out loud.

"YOSH! My name is ROCK LEE, the GREAT ASURE BEAST of KONOHA! My likes are to TRAIN and to allow my POWER OF YOUTH TO GROW TO ITS LIMITS AND BEYOND! I don't have any dislikes. My GOAL IN LIFE IS TO FOLLOW THE GREAT GAI-SENSEI AND BECOME A GREAT NINJA. THE BEST IN KONOHA! I'LL BE KNOWN AS THE GREAT ROCK LEE, AZURE BEAST.. OW!" Lee's passionate speech was brought to an end when Tenten punched him in the eye and told him to shut up right in his face.

"Tenten. That isn't very nice..." Lee murmured but Tenten only shook her fist in his face, threatening to punch his other eye out if he dared speak another word. Deciding to remain quiet for the time being, Lee randomly pointed at a person opposite him to become the next in line to talk. Unfortunately, he had just selected Maya to speak next, most probably the shyest member of the all the Gate Guardians.

Pointing to herself, Maya inquired softly. "Me?" When Lee nodded furiously, she gulped in nervousness, feeling the heavy gazes of all the crowd right on her, making her fidget while frantically thinking of something to say. "Well... My name is Oniyoubu Maya... I am one of the Spirit Speakers (3). I... I don't like being the centre of attention." And with that statement, a few of the Leaf Nins looked another way, firmly believing that they were making her uncomfortable with their prior unwavering gazes. "I... I dislike people disrespecting the spirits of the dead and the spirits of the Earth and animals. I dislike taking lives but I will if I'm ordered to. My goal... my goal in life... is to... to" Here, Maya paused slightly and thought about what exactly does she want out of life.

Maya isn't a very ambitious girl. All she ever really wanted in life is to live peacefully with nature. However, she was brought up in a

secretive but powerful clan that is considered one of the oldest in all of Kuunoki. There are certain expectations placed on the children of such clans just as there is a need to excel in the Ninja arts by the mixed blood clans and the adopted children of other Air-based clans. Maya isn't so naïve that she would believe she could ever reach her goal in life, but it was a nice thought none the less. However, her wondering thoughts had brought upon the gathering an uncomfortable silence, before Kiba finally voiced out an issue he was been incredibly curious about.

"Hey. Can I ask you question?" Not waiting for the girl to respond, Kiba barged on with his intended question. "Why are you wearing so much bandages that it even covers your face and most of your head? Are you suffering from severe burns or what?" Since his sister was a vet, Kiba had been exposed to a few animals that had suffered severe burns under the negligence of humans, which was the only reason why he thought Maya would be willing to wear so many bandages in the first place.

Behind her bandaged face, Maya blushed hotly at Kiba's intent gaze, completely uncomfortable with his very intimate question (though the dog boy didn't know it). "Well... I... that is."

Unable to take his cousin's stuttering any further, Yami decided to interrupt and answer the question instead. "In the Clan of the Oniyoubu, there is a law. All children over the age of eight must wear bandages to cover their face and head. This is just a family tradition. The first person outside of the clan to have the opportunity to see their faces will be awarded the right to marry them, regardless of age and gender. There has been cases where two females are married off or two males being married off to one another in the clan."

Beside Yami, Maya had slowly but surely shifted herself behind her cousin, trying desperately to hide herself from the wide-eyed looks being directed her way. She knew it was rather stupid of her clan to make that rule about marriage, but it was a family tradition, and there was nothing *she* could do about it.

Wincing at the amount of attention being directed at poor Maya, Naruto decided to change the subject. "So Kiba. Since you're the one to ask, you can go next in line."

"Huh?" Kiba was abruptly brought out of his thought processes regarding the weird rule and traditions of the Oniyoubu clan by Naruto's comments. But after a short while, he was able to compose himself enough to start his own introduction. "My name is Inuzuka Kiba. My likes are training, having fun with Akamaru, and beating the crap out of everyone. I dislike people who treat animals badly, especially those who abuse dogs. My goal in life is to become a powerful Shinobi and clan head, making my family proud." Akamaru barked out loud in support of his master.

It was a typical introduction that didn't warrant any extra thought, so Kiba quickly directed his inquiring gaze at Yami, curious as to how Yami had known so much about the Oniyoubu clan. "Your turn next. But first a few question: One, how come you know so much about the Oniyoubu whats-it-ma-call-it? Are you a member of that clan too? If so, how come you're not wearing any bandages? And Two, what's that weird tattoo on your face?" Kiba's curiosity about the new comers simply couldn't be held back anymore.

With an amused glint in his eye, Yami decided to start his own explanations. "My name is Shinzo Yami. My father IS a member of the Oniyoubu clan, and my mother is a member of the Dokudes Main family. However, I did NOT take after the names of my parents because I do not use the bloodline abilities of either clan. I have my own special abilities, one that is unique to me alone. That is why, when I was born I was taken into the care of Ruri-sama and Kaga-san as an apprentice in training. I was given the name 'Shinzo' by Ruri-sama, it means 'new image'. My likes are eating, reading and sleeping. I dislike seeing my close friends and family hurt or uncomfortable in any way. My goal in life is to repay Ruri-sama and Kaga-san for the kindness they had shown me as well as their dedication in raising me in the first place. As for the tattoo, it is actually a seal."

Lifting some of his hair away, Yami was able to expose the entire tattoo on the right side of his face. "The part you see is the only visible part of the seal, but actually, the seal is a complex diagram of lines and words written all over my body. The seal allows me to make a pact with my most valued weapons – the dyamon crystal. With this seal in place I can channel my chakra directly into the dyamon crystal without the use of charka strings or any of those menial things. It allows me to manipulate the dyamon crystal to my will in an instant of a thought." Releasing the grip on his hair, Yami settled back into silence while his eyes quickly flitted through the Leaf group before settling on Sakura, making sure that she knew she was next before finally moving away.

"Right. Me next. My name is Haruno Sakura. I like..." Glancing uncertainly towards the Uchiha beside her, Sakura silently made a decision for herself. "Medicine. And healing. I dislike people hurting my friends and family. The person I hate most is Orochimaru." She stated with firm conviction, shocking most of the members of the Leaf, as she hadn't mentioned anything about her crush on the Uchiha heir. "My ambition is to become a great Medic Nin like my master – Hokage-sama and Shizune-sensei. I also like to dabble in Genjutsu whenever I have the time."

Sakura shrugged off the shocked looks on her companions' faces. She had made her decision – she would let go of this childish crush and grow up to be a mature Ninja. Konoha doesn't need a love-struck girl at the moment. It needs powerful, strong Ninjas to defend it. And she refused to be disregarded as weak from this moment forth. *I made an oath to myself a long time ago that I'm not being left behind by Naruto or Sasuke. Now, it is time for me to take a step forward without following in their footsteps. I am my own person. I should make my own decisions about myself, and live life my own way. I won't be a burden on anyone anymore. I will be strong.* Sakura reaffirmed her oath silently to herself, sure that this time, she would become the best that she could be.

Glancing around at the remaining Gate Guardians, Sakura chose Akiko to go next. "Hi!" Akiko cheerfully waved her arm around at everyone. "The name is Kazeha Akiko. My adoptive grandfather is the famous 'Wind Storm' master himself, but I guess you guys wouldn't know about him at all (4). Anyway... I love to eat anything sweet; chocolate is my favourite. I love fighting strong opponents, there's just nothing more refreshing and challenging than fighting people at a high level of strength. I love having fun; playing and exploring whenever I get an opportunity to do so. What I hate are people who piss me off!"

Pausing and thinking momentarily to herself, Akiko finally came up with the rest of her description. "I too, would love the opportunity to explore the world, maybe go back to the Sand village and have a look at how much it's changed. But before that, I want to prove myself to be one of the strongest female ninjas in the world and protect both Ruri-sama and Naruto-sama to the very best of my ability. I also hate loosing so I refuse to fail such an important mission." Nodding to herself, Akiko switched moods again and randomly pointed at someone opposite her with a wide smile on her face. Unfortunately, she pointed directly at Hinata, who was already fighting a full body flush and fidgeting in nervousness.

"I..." Hinata gulped in hesitancy but with a glance at Naruto's calm and encouraging face, she continued forth with her own introduction. "My name is Hyuuga Hinata. I am... the oldest of the main Hyuuga family heiress." Here, though Hinata didn't notice it, both Yami and Seiko tensed in suppressed emotion, whether it was anger or hate, even they weren't sure as they continued to watch Hinata's stuttering expression.

"I like healing too. I hate seeing people hurt in any way. But... But if I have to fight to protect my important people, I am willing to fight." Hinata took another quick glance at Naruto before blushing like a red tomato. "My dream... is to become a Medical Ninja and help people." Coming to an abrupt silence, Hinata also admitted to herself mentally. *I would also love to get to know Naruto-kun more though.*

However, I know that's probably an impossible dream. / She mentally chastised herself.

Uncomfortable with the silence, Naruto signalled for Hikari to go next. Willingly, the brown haired girl introduced herself again. "My name is Raitei Hikari. Like my brother already said. I am one of two heirs to the Raitei clan. I like to read 'quietly'." This comment was directed with a firm glare at her twin, who only shrugged in response with a smile on his face. "I dislike noise and chaos. Things like messy or dirty rooms really irritate me." Another firm glare at her brother. "My goal in life is to make my parents proud, beat my brother." Here, Koushiro finally gave a look of indignation. "And to help protect Ruri-sama and Naruto-sama with all I've got."

With her introduction finished, Hikari motioned for Tenten to follow next. "My name is Tenten. I like training and learning how to use new weapons. I dislike boys who look down on girls." She directed a glare at Shikamaru. "And my goal in life is to become a strong Konoichi like Tsunade-sama." Short, sweet and directly to the point, Tenten motioned for Katana to take the next shot.

Snorting in irritation at having to participate, Katana murmured out his description with an undertone of annoyance. "My name is Ryuji Katana. I'm a weapons specialist." Unbeknownst to Katana, he had suddenly become a target of interest by Tenten. "And I also specialise in speed attacks." Again, Katana had become an unwitting target to Lee. "I don't have many likes. Just stay out of my way and we'll both be happy. Call me 'short' or anything to that effect, and you will find yourself without legs." He threatened with an undertone of violence. "I *like* chopping things up, especially human limbs." Kiba turned slightly green at this sentence.

"My goal in life..." Katana took a moment to look away from the surrounding groups. His gaze firmly on the horizon in the far distance and his face softened drastically in the wavering sunlight. "My goal in life is make my father proud, proud of the son he had adopted from the streets of the Grass village. And to do that, I need to become strong, strong enough to protect all members of the Uzumaki clan

and ensuring a future for the people of the Hidden Air village." He turned his attention back to the people sitting around him and quickly glared at the next person to take up the challenge, which just so happen to be Sasuke.

Sasuke huffed slightly at the way the boy was glaring at him, but he didn't say anything to rebut. "My name is Uchiha Sasuke. I am the only remaining member of my clan in this village. I like..." After a long pause, Sasuke blushed very slightly before mumbling quietly. "My friends." Another pause and he continued on with the rest of his explanations. "I have many dislikes and won't be going into them right this moment. I don't really have a dream, just an ambition. And that is to kill a certain someone and rebuild my clan. That's all." Tuning his attention to the remaining Air Nins left, Sasuke nodded to the young girl by the far side of the group – Seiko.

"Humph." Seiko grunted unladylike before gazing with narrowed, suspicious eyes at everyone in the circle, including her own comrades in arm. "My name is Dokudes Seiko. I AM the heir to the Dokudes Clan. My likes are doing human experiments as well as coming up with new and improved poisons to blow things up." A few of the members of the Leaf team – namely the Medic Nins like Sakura and Hinata – either grew expressions of horror on their faces or a show of anger and complete fury.

Before a fight could break out, Naruto quickly jumped in to reassure everyone. "WHAT SHE **MEANT** was that she likes experimenting with gene-therapy so that she can help IMPROVE the lives of injured or disabled people. But she does play around with natural and unnatural poisons that blow up in her face once in a while." A few snickers erupted from Naruto's explanations and Seiko's full glare was piercing in Naruto's direction. But he didn't care. Naruto didn't really know why Seiko tries so hard to distance herself from the rest of humanity, but it reminded him of how he once was a long time ago. And he knew how lonely that could be at times too, so he was going to do his best to include her on all their get-togethers just so she can get use to interacting with more people around her age and

maybe (if he was lucky) she would be able to make some friends for once.

"As I said!" Seiko growled out in a threatening voice, which immediately silenced the various snickers around the group. "I HATE being laughed at! I dislike being treated as a child! And I absolutely HATE being looked down upon." With each sentence, Seiko's voice became low and dangerous, almost to the point of making the Leaf Nins shiver in fear. But with another interrupted wave of Naruto's hand, the threatening atmosphere disappeared leaving the Leaf Nins unable to figure out what Naruto had done.

What the Leaf Nins didn't know was the Seiko had been actively collecting the various particles in the air and almost to the point of charging them with her own chakra, to make them explode with her anger. However, with a wave of his hand, Naruto was able to silently use 'Tenshi no Doki' (Angel's wrath) to manoeuvre the particles away from Seiko's influence, completely stopping her from doing anything.

Growling lowly in annoyance, Seiko snapped the last bit of information about herself quickly before retreating to brood. "My goal in life is to prove that the Dokudes clan is STILL the most powerful and most deadly clan in the world."

Seeing that Seiko had completely retreated to herself, Naruto motioned for one of the Leaf Nins to volunteer to be next. Ino took up the challenge. "My name is Yamanaka Ino. My likes are fashion, training and eating healthy." After taking part in the training sessions tutored by Haku, Ino had undergone many changes. She had finally realised that it was better to stop dieting and eat healthy instead, followed by increasing her daily physical exercise and training in order to use up the energy of the amount of food she intakes.

Not only that, but Ino had also changed her priorities a bit. Instead of always looking good to attract boys, Ino truly wants to become stronger. After the Sasuke retrieval mission in which, she was brutally injured by the boy she once had a crush on, Ino's confidence in herself as well as her trust in others had been severely affected.

After that incident, Ino swore that she would become strong enough to at least defend herself from such assaults in the future. Being a stubborn girl at heart, Ino had taken the lessons learnt from that mission and made many life-altering decisions. She now trained at least 5 hours a day, excluding her regular missions and she no longer have a crush on the Uchiha prodigy. In fact, she would go so far as to hate Sasuke.

"I hate arrogant people who think they're better than everyone else in the world. I also hate power hungry people who would do anything to gain power, including betraying and killing their own friends." This comment was a direct attack at the Uchiha boy sitting some distance away from Ino. However, instead of defending himself, Sasuke remained silent, simply taking the abuse as Ino flung it at his direction. To him, she had every right to hate him for what he had done. After all, he had almost killed her so all this hatred was justified in some way.

It had been surprising to all the Leaf Nins just how much Ino had come to hate the Uchiha prodigy. Before, she had been one of his biggest fan girls, always fawning over his looks and abilities. It seems as if she had done a complete one-eighty in her attitude towards Sasuke and it really isn't a good thing. The two couldn't even stand each other being in the same room if the others weren't around to calm the tension. Ino would go to such lengths to abuse Sasuke verbally and then followed long period of ignoring his presence. It was a vicious cycle that not even a professional psychologist could help solve.

"My dream is to become a strong Kunoichi in my own right and to protect Konoha with my own hands." Ino replied confidently, which was met with a wave of silence from both the Gate Guardians and her Leaf compatriots.

In the end, it was Naruto who voiced a question of his own. He hadn't been in contact with Ino for a while now and hadn't really understood much about Ino's hostility against the Uchiha prodigy. This is why he thought he could make a small inquiry, just to satisfy

his own curiosity. "Um... Ino-san. Don't you have a crush on someone?" He asked softly, almost afraid of what she would do to him in response.

The other Leaf Nins tensed in anticipation. They knew exactly what Naruto meant by the question, but they also knew that Ino wouldn't appreciate being related to the last Uchiha member. They were sure she would become angry and start a fight. They were wrong.

Ino actually blushed at Naruto's comment but still remained silent for a while, collecting her thoughts. "Well. I guess you could say I **do** have a crush on someone, but *he* doesn't know that I have a crush on him yet... And well, this isn't something I want to rush into at such a young age." Pausing slightly, Ino didn't notice the shocked expressions on all her friends face; even Sasuke had his eyes wider than usual. "I want to become strong enough first so that he would *actually* notice me. And then... well... maybe I'll work my way around him to interest him in something more than just being friends or mere acquaintances (5). But that's all in the future, nothing concrete at the moment." Still blushing slightly, Ino motioned for Tori to take up the next challenge.

Giving the others a bright smile, Tori easily soaked up the attention all the people in this gathering directed at him as his turn came up to introduce himself. "My name is Kataichi Tori. I like lots of stuff." Waving his hands around in a childish manner, Tori demonstrated just how 'much' stuff he certainly likes. "I like my big brother – Touya. I like my best friend - Katana." Here, he pointed at Katana's face with an impish grin. "I like my family though they make me angry at times." Tori nodded to himself in as a sign of wisdom though he looked more cute than serious. "I like Naruto-sama, Ruri-sama and Kaga-san. I like eating, playing, and sleeping. Basically I like lots of stuff." He repeated himself just to emphasise the point.

"I don't really DISLIKE anything. Unless people treat me and my friends very badly, then I don't like them. My goal in life... hmm..." Tapping his fingers on his chin, Tori looked up at the sky to think over what his dreams should be. "I guess I wanna change the Kuunoki

too. I want to make it a fun place to live, or at least..." His innocent grey eyes narrowed slightly in pure determination. "At least give everyone a chance to choose their destiny. And to do that, I will become strong." Shifting back to his childish face, Tori happily pointed at the next person in line. "YOU'RE NEXT!" He shouted gleefully, followed by a rush of childish laughter.

Chouji quickly finished off the rest of his chips before packing the rubbish bag away. When he looked back at the gathering of people, he gave them all a slightly subdued smile, as if afraid of what they would think of him later. "My name is Akimichi Chouji. I like to eat and to spend time with my friends. I don't really like to fight, but I will if it means protecting my friends, family and home. My goal in life... well." Chouji blushed slightly as he continued. "I would like to own a restaurant one day that serves the best barbeque steak in all of Konoha, but for now, I'd settle for becoming a strong Ninja." He shrugged his hunched shoulders before nodding for Mishizu to take over.

The blue haired girl straightened slightly in a militaristic movement. "My name is Kaiba Mishizu, fifth seat in the Gate Guardians. My mother is an ex-Mist Shinobi, father an Air Ninja, and my uncle is one of the deceased Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. I do not like or dislike anything specifically. My goals are my own, which is to establish myself as a powerful Shinobi in my own right." Short and direct, discussed in a very formal, almost militaristic presentation. The other Leaf Nins weren't sure whether this was the personality of Mishizu overall or if she was just feeling tense and not very sociable in their presence. What they didn't know was that her mood shifts depending on the situation at hand, and more often than not, she would rely on her military background of which her father raised her, instead of the social or interactive ambience that other people are more use to. When asked later, Naruto could only describe Mishizu as 'like water', she flows with the environment; at times, she can be as cold as ice or as moist as dew.

An awkward silence followed Mishizu's introduction, as she didn't point out who would go next. It wasn't really that hard of a choice but the only people left are Shino and Neji, both of which weren't very comfortable getting up and talking about themselves. Soon however, the awkward lull was soon interrupted when Kiba elbowed Shino, indicating that he should go next, in which he did. Coughing innocuously, Shino began his speech. "Aburame Shino. I like insects. I dislike things that kill insects. I wish to become a strong heir for my clan." And with that very brief statement, he stepped down.

With only Neji left, the others automatically directed their attention to the only remaining person who hadn't introduced himself. Though uncomfortable under their combined gaze, Neji didn't show any outward signs of his discomfort. Instead, his eyes narrowed in slight hesitation. "What about that other Gate Guardian, sitting by that tree? Shouldn't we include him too?" Though he asked in an innocent manner, Neji was very curious about the young man with very similar eyes to the Hyuuga Byakugan. In fact, from what Neji could tell, the boy DID have Byakugan eyes. *I But that's not possible. The Hyuuga are incredibly protective of their bloodline abilities. There's just no way that an outsider would have our eyes!* His conscious railed at him but Neji refused to let the issue lie until he gets a firm answer.

Before Naruto could dissuade the situation, the other Leaf Shinobis had already started to nod in agreement. Kiba spoke up: "Yeah, why don't we include that guy over there? I know you said that he's in a bit of a bad mood, Naruto, but that's no reason to exclude him completely, right? I mean, we're only trying to be helpful and friendly and stuff, so we should include him too!" The dog boy nodded to himself wisely, and the others followed in his opinion.

Naruto sweated at the back of his neck as he looked over at his fellow Gate Guardians. It wasn't that he truly wants to exclude Jubei but the truth of the matter was that Jubei doesn't want to participate. He doesn't want to be anywhere near another member of the Hyuuga clan. Seeing as he wasn't getting any help or support from

his own subordinates, as they all had their heads lowered – including Yami and Seiko, Naruto had no choice but to proceed.

Giving a heavy sigh, Naruto called out to his last subordinate without ever turning to look at said boy. "Jubei. Can you come here please?" In an instant later, there is a young man standing directly behind Naruto. The tall but skinny, pale skinned teenager, with white Byakugan eyes and light violet hair swaying in the breeze, stood confidently in his stance. His infamous smile missing from his blank face, a face that showed no expression, neither fury, disgust or discomfort.

Sighing again, Naruto asked Jubei gently if he would also like to introduce himself. After a long and awkward pause, Jubei began his very short story. "I am Dokudes Jubei, leader of the Gate Guardians. I have no likes and I will not get into my dislikes. My ambition... is a secret for now." So basically, all the information Jubei was willing to give out was his name and rank, which didn't really appease Neji in the least.

Also standing to his feet, Neji gave Jubei a challenging stare. "Dokudes, you say? Then may I ask, why do you have the same eyes as members of the Hyuuga Clan? I did not know that there are any members of the Hyuuga who had reproduced outside the clan, and even outside of Konoha. The Hyuuga clan are very protective of their bloodlines, so it's impossible that you are *just* a Dokudes." He affirmed confidently, challenging Jubei to give a viable explanation and ignored Naruto's tensed body.

Jubei ignored Neji's questions and asked one of his own. "Who are you, boy? What is your status in the Hyuuga?" He asked directly and without much expression in his voice, like a cold breeze drifting by.

Neji narrowed his eyes, slightly irritated that his original questions were ignored but decided to answer the man's inquiries anyway as a show of curtesy. "My name is Hyuuga Neji. I am Hinata-sama's cousin and bodyguard, one of the Branch House members."

"I see." Jubei gave the boy a sad smile before turning around. "Then you can ask Hyuuga Hiashi about who and what I am. Tell him: 'Dokudes Hina gives her regards.' He will know what I mean." With that said, Jubei suddenly disappeared, using one of his rings to teleport him to wherever he wants to be.

"OI! What the hell was all that about?" Kiba called out after Jubei's sudden disappearance, completely unsatisfied by the sudden mystery and show of abrupt hostility towards them by that strange boy. As the other Leaf Nins started talking among themselves and asking the Gate Guardians what was really going on, Naruto could only sigh for a third time in a row. He knew that this would happen, he just knew it.

Giving a loud cough, Naruto soon caught the attention of all the Leaf Nins. "I sincerely apologise for Jubei's hostile behaviour, guys. But I did mention that he was in a bit of a bad mood. As for why he acted the way he did, I don't have the right to tell you anything, as this is his story to tell. However, as Jubei said, if you're really dying to know Neji, you can probably get a full explanation from Hyuuga Hiashi-san." Getting up to his own feet, a few people with sharp hearing caught the whispered words that Naruto mumbled to himself. "After all, it's all his fault."

Once straightened up, Naruto faced his friends again. "I guess it's kind of late now." Only then did everyone notice that the sun was slowly drifting down towards the horizon as evening sets in. "It's been great seeing you guys again, and even though we didn't really get to do much at all this afternoon, it was still great to just get together and talk. Maybe we can do this again another day." Ino and Sakura nodded affirmatively as they had already started planning a second get-together party of some sort in their minds. "Well, keep me up to date then. As of now, I'm kinda tired so I'm going to go home and rest. I'll see you guys later, then!" Naruto concluded as he slowly walked away, the rest of the Gate Guardians following him.

There was a long list of 'goodbyes', 'farewells', 'nice or pleasure to meet you's and so on and so forth types of greetings being

exchanged between the two groups but overall, they each parted with better relationship among them and a better understanding of each group members. Though still nowhere near 'friend' status, they can at least say they know of one another and are pleasant 'acquaintances' if nothing else.

However, a few of the Leaf Shinobis had certainly had their interest peaked and would be doing their own investigations regarding a few of the Gate Guardians. Lee couldn't wait to challenge Katana for a friendly spar one day. Tenten was feeling the same, while Neji was more preoccupied with discovering the truth behind Jubei.

Other than that, the gathering of people slowly dispersed until no one is left on top of the Hokage Monument's premises. Everyone had their own things to do, but they promised to meet up again real soon.

Neji and Hinata walked silently on the dirt path towards the Hyuuga Compound. The Hyuuga estate hadn't been touched by the embers of war a few months back, as they were located at a completely different area from the various battlefields. Therefore, the Hyuuga clan itself hadn't suffered much material loses but there had been a few loss of life, which made the entire clan more sombre nowadays.

"Hinata-sama." Neji suddenly asked, out of the blue.

Startled, Hinata could only blush in fright and look towards her older cousin.

Neji had a speculative look on his face as if his mind was far away. There was an awkward silence before Neji finally asked Hinata what was on his mind. "Do you know where Hiashi-sama is at this moment in time?"

Thinking for a bit, Hinata answered his question. "Otou-sama is probably training Hanabi at the Western Dojo in the Hyuuga estate." Looking away, slightly ashamed of herself, Hinata continued to

mutter in a soft voice. "He's preparing her to take on the position of Hyuuga Heiress, so he spends most of the evenings with Hanabi."

Gazing sadly at Hinata's visage, Neji could do nothing else, except say: "I see."

After almost half an hour's unspoken walking, the two Genins finally reached the looming structure of the Hyuuga compound. However, both were still obviously bothered by Jubei's last comments and could not find it in their will to let go of this mystery. With only a glance of silent communication, the two decided to pursue this matter, if only to satisfy their curiosity more than anything else.

Just as Hinata had predicted, they found both Hyuuga Hiashi – the leader of the Hyuuga Clan, and his youngest daughter – Hanabi practicing at the Western Dojo in the Hyuuga estate. Knocking lighting against the bamboo screen, Hinata spoke up in a soft, demure voice before slowly opening the sliding doors to show both Neji and her presence. "Otou-sama, please accept our apologies for this interruption."

Pausing in their sparing, Hanabi sent her elder sister deadly glare, annoyed that her training had been interrupted. Hiashi simply paused before demanding in a loud and deep voice. "What is it?"

Frightened by her father's sudden show of suppressed anger, Hinata lost her nerve and almost started to twitch in nervousness. That is, until Neji interrupted the potential scolding by inputting the rest of the explanation. "We are sorry for interrupting your training session, Hiashi-sama, Hanabi-sama. But both Hinata-sama and I had an enquiry to ask, in which only Hiashi-sama is able to answer."

Nodding to Neji's brief explanation, Hiashi gave them permission to continue. "Go ahead, what is it you want to ask?"

Bowing in gratitude, Neji continued. "Both Hinata-sama and myself have met a suspicious person a few hours ago. He is not of Hyuuga decent but he seems to hold the same Byakugan eyes as the

descendants of the Hyuuga Clan. We were just wondering if there were any connection between this mysterious person and other clans of the Hyuuga outside of Konoha."

Hiashi's eyes narrowed in misgiving before he quickly commanded the two to provide more information. "What does this impostor look like? There has never been a Hyuuga born outside of the Hyuuga clan! And if what you say is right, then there is a leak somewhere in Konoha in which the pride of the Hyuuga has been exposed!"

Lowering his head in order not to face Hiashi's angry face, Neji spoke in a cautious manner, knowing that if he said anything wrong, Hiashi would definitely punish both him and Hinata for lying. "The boy seems to be of either 17 or 16 years of age. He has long, light purple hair reaching the back of his shoulders. As stated before, he has white eyes almost exactly like ours – I suspect they are the same Byakugan eyes. He is of medium height, not skinny but not overweight, quite lithe in appearance. His skin is very pale and he has long, delicate fingers. He wears a white tank top over long white pants with golden rings attached to his arms, legs, chest and neck. He says his name is Dokudes Jubei."

At that last sentence, Hiashi's face immediately paled drastically. "Dokudes... you say?" He murmured softly, as if afraid of what the answer would be.

Nodding again, Neji answered. "Yes. He also gave us this cryptic remark. He told us to send you – Hiashi-sama – a message. 'Dokudes Hina gives her regards.' That is all the information he provided us." Neji finally finished, carefully watching Hiashi's reactions curiously, cataloguing all his expressions ready for later analysis. */ What is going on! From Hiashi-sama's expression, he almost looks as if he's seen a ghost. /*

Quickly activating his Byakugan, Hiashi searched all over Konoha before finding his target. Neji's description had certainly captured the teen correctly. Hiashi found the youth languishing on a large rock some distance away from the new, main gates, outside of the Hidden

Village of the Leaf's territory. Realising his target had also noticed his spying eyes, Hiashi immediately released his jutsu before coming to a decision.

"Neji, Hinata, Hanabi, stay here. I have something I must deal with." And without a second thought or even a look at the three young Shinobis standing before him, Hiashi stormed out of the dojo, walked briskly through the garden, jumped the fence and leapt off into the distance.

The three remaining children stared at the now missing elder with a completely shocked expression on their faces. "What the... What the hell just happened!" Neji couldn't help but swear; thoughts completely disjointed from a few seconds ago.

"Um..." Twisting her fingers together in a nervous fashion, Hinata stuttered out. "Maybe... Maybe Otou-sama has something important to attend to..." She murmured in an unconvincing fashion, even to herself.

"What the hell did you two bring up? Now, Otou-sama has completely forgotten about the practice session he promised to give me this evening!" Hanabi shouted in a childish fashion, angry with her father for forgetting his promise, angry with her sister and cousin for bringing something to her father's attention leading to his leaving in the first place, and also irritated by this mysterious youth that had completely captured her father's attention. It isn't everyday that either Hinata or Hanabi gets to spend some quality time with their father, and most of those father-daughter times were spent training.

Ever since their mother's death when Hanabi was still a baby, Hanabi had treasured every moment she gets to spend with her only other parent, and detests it horrendously if this private time is interrupted (6). Though she always acted mature and too old for her age whenever she is with her father, Hanabi only does that in order to gain his attention and praise. Truthfully, she had always been a bit childish, a bit spoilt and rather arrogant. She believed that since she is an heiress of the Hyuuga Clan and one who can beat her own

sister (who is at least 5 years older than her), Hanabi feels as if the entire Hyuuga clan should have been hers to control. It was simply her 'birthright' to do so.

"We were just curious as to why that guy had the same eyes as us, that's all! We didn't think that Hiashi-sama would react the way he did. I don't even know who the hell 'Dokudes Hina' is, do you?" Neji looked at Hinata and Hanabi in a suspicious fashion, as if daring the two to hold out some secret from him.

Hanabi, expectedly, blew up. "Of course NOT!" She scolded her cousin in a superior fashion. Even though Neji was probably ten times stronger than her physically and mentally, she was still ranked higher than him. And ever since the Chuunin Exams, where Hiashi had been spending some time giving Neji private tutoring, Hanabi had started seeing her cousin as a rival of sorts for her father's attention, affections and time. So, it was no wonder Hanabi pulls rank on her cousin whenever she was given the opportunity. "As if any secret of the Main House would ever be shared with members of the Branch House family? And it's not like you Branch House members are really all that important!" Hanabi sneered at Neji in a very cruel fashion.

Seeing Neji's infuriated expression, Hinata finally stepped in between the arguing duo, completely floored by her younger sister's cruelty to bring up something that had always upset Neji. "Hanabi! That's enough from you! Otou-sama has shown favour in Neji-nissan, and as such, you have to show some respect for your older and more powerful cousin!" Hinata, surprisingly, showed enough of her anger to scold her younger sister in a proper fashion.

Ignoring Hinata's order, Hanabi continued with her scorn. "HA! This coming from the good for nothing sister of mine, who can't even beat ME – a person SIX years younger!" The young child cried out in a pompous tantrum, unwilling and unable to see the surge of hurt that rose on Hinata's expression.

Seeing Hinata's distress, Neji decided to pull out before things were said that could never be undone again. Grabbing a hold of Hinata's arm, Neji pulled the slightly shaking girl away from her enraged sister. "Let's go, Hinata-sama. I, for one, am too curious to listen to orders. We're going to follow Hiashi-sama and see what the hell is going on between him and that Jubei guy."

Nodding absently, Hinata allowed her cousin to pull her away, out the door, through the garden and out the front gates of the Hyuuga estate in which they had just passed some minutes ago. Realising that both her cousin and sister had left her in the most unsightly fashion, Hanabi almost decided to throw another childish tantrum and destroy something in the room before she remembered that her father would be angry with her if she did so.

Instead, she decided to seek punishment on both Neji and Hinata for disobeying her father's direct orders. Seeking out some of the Main House guards, she would tell them that her father was in danger of being disrupted during an important meeting by her sister and cousin. */ That will teach them for ruining my training session! /* She thought arrogantly to herself.

(To be continued.)

(1) Some of you may notice I purposely changed this description of Naruto's introduction from when he first introduced himself to his team during Chapter 2 of Faith in Humanity . Here was his original opinion of himself: "My name is Uzumaki Naruto. I like ... (pause)... Ramen. I dislike many things. I have no ambition and no dream but ... my only wish is to understand why my father was willing to die to protect this village."

(2) Koushiro is actually referring to the 7 Councillors of the Kuunoki.

(3) The ability to speak with spirits, whether they are earth-type spirits (trees, flowers, rocks, grass, et cetera), animal spirits, or deceased human spirits.

(4) There are four very famous elemental users that once presented the Hidden Air Village as Gate Guardians themselves. These elemental users include users of Fire, Wind, Water, and Earth. The 'Wind master' or sometimes nicknamed 'Wind Storm' is the old man Kazeha. Kazeha-san doesn't have a family and have adopted Akiko as his prodigy when she was around 8 years old.

(5) I won't tell you WHO I am referring to, but I can say it isn't Sasuke. You can guess all you want.

(6) This whole bit is up to interpretation so I basically made it up. Nothing is ever mentioned about Hinata and Hanabi's mother (Hiashi's wife), and nothing is ever really mentioned about Hanabi's personality or attitude. So basically, I made Hanabi into a spoilt brat that clings to the attention Hiashi gives her like a lifeline in a life filled with tradition, rules and expectations. As she watched how Hinata always fails to uphold the expectations of the Hyuuga, Hanabi tries even harder to win favour of their father. That's the way I'm gonna portray Hanabi in my story.

Heh heh. I know. Terribly ending. But worry not, for the next chapter is right here for your reading enjoyment! I hope you all appreciate this SUPER - TRIPLE update! It's been a while since I tried to do that and this is the result. Hope you all like it.

And please, remember to review. Thanks.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

One of my beta-readers brought to my attention that the Hidden Air Village's philosophy of 'Nothing is eternal' mindset may be detrimental to their village in becoming powerful in its own right – after all, if you can never win, why bother. However, I will take this time to explain a bit more about the structure of the Kunnoki.

The hidden Air Village has social classes, based on the emergence of different clans in the village. The social class is as follows:

1. Uzumaki Prophet / Leader and the 7 Councillors are the top rank
2. Uzumaki Breed house members and the 10 Gate Guardians
3. Leaders of the various clans
4. Clansmen (this group includes EVERYONE who can fight)
5. Villagers – people with absolutely NO SKILL in fighting

The 'nothing is eternal' philosophy is embraced by the Councillors and are therefore forced fed into the mindset of its citizens. However, at the same time, the councillors also continue to push / pressure the newer generation of citizens to OUT DO their predecessors. That's why some clans people split off from their clans and start their own clan – especially when they figured out a completely new way to do things or have produced a completely new blood limit – as is the case with Yami.

Technically speaking, when I talk about 'clans', I'm NOT referring to the 'family' based clans of Konoha. I'm talking the unique 'abilities' of particular clans that distinguish themselves from one another. That's way certain adopted people can be regarded as part of one's clan as long as they use similar abilities as the rest of the clan (in the case of Katana and Akiko). At the same time, if a member of a certain 'clan' family do not or is incapable of using the skills that the clan is famous for, their very own family can disown them (as is the case with Tori's older brother).

Mixed blood clans usually come forth due to a new form of fighting style / blood limit / or special ability, when a local Air Nin marries an outside ninja. It is a mixture of two different abilities to form one new entity. If their children showcase these 'mixed' unique abilities than they are automatically recognised as a 'new' clan. In Yami's unique case (of which he and his parents DIDN'T become a new clan) is

because his abilities are NOT a mixture of the Dokudes and Oniyoubu abilities. Instead, he literary created something completely new and out of this world.

The Dokudes family probably has the widest range of skills because the only similarity between each Dokudes clan member is that:

1. They are all 'scientists';
2. They all have extreme chakra control abilities;
3. They all have unique antibodies against poisons; and
4. They have extreme knowledge over the human body.

This means that Dokudes clan members can 'specialise' in hundreds of different fields – poisons, mind control, medical Ninjutsu, et cetera. This is one of the reasons why the Dokudes clan is the largest clan in the Hidden Air village.

Collapse of the Hyuuga Clan

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Eighteen: Collapse of the Hyuuga Clan

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech" , ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: OOC for a few characters – especially Hyuuga Hiashi and Hanabi. So you HAVE BEEN WARNED! Building on the relationships and personalities between my original characters and the cannon ones. I will be giving out more backgrounds on the various characters, especially regarding the Hyuuga main house members. For those of you who have already read the profile of Jubei from my website, please enjoy as the truth finally comes out. Hope you all enjoy!

Chapter 18

"So. What brings the great and prideful leader of the Hyuuga clan all the way out here, to the middle of practically no where?" Jubei asked in a nonchalant voice, hidden with an undertone of steel, his back to the newly arrived Hiashi.

Hiashi took a short moment to get his breath in control. He had rushed here at the quickest speed he could, wanting desperately to meet the boy face to face and yet dreading every moment of it.

Finally calming his nerves, Hiashi asked the first thing that came to mind. "How is your mother? Is she well?"

Jubei snorted in a disgusted manner, never turning to sneer at Hiashi. "She's dead." He answered, short and succinctly.

Hiashi's eyes widened in comical shock. "But... you said..." He stuttered unaccustomedly, unsure of even how to continue his question.

Jubei gave a short laugh at Hiashi's naivety. "Here's the rest of my quote - 'Hina gives her regards... from beyond the grave. She asks: will you betray me in death, just as you betray me in life.' End quote." He answered with a decidedly evil voice, enjoying every moment of Hiashi's torment.

Trembling in the face of such facts, Hiashi found it incredibly hard to return to his stoic self. Plagued by images of Hina – her beauty, her power, her strong will, Hiashi just couldn't comprehend how such a strong woman could die so easily. It was beyond understanding. All those years he had deluded himself that Hina still lived peacefully within the confines of the Kuunoki. That one day, she would find the compassion in her to forgive him and return. All those years of waiting, hoping, secretly praying for her return as he couldn't even find her if he tried; but for what? She's gone. She's really dead.

"How?" Hiashi managed to choke out the single word, for it was the only thing coherent now in his mind.

Jubei finally turned around to glare at Hiashi heatedly and gave him a sadistic smirk in return. "Because of you. You and your clan killed her; if not physically, then spiritually and emotionally. She died a slow and painful death, cursing you and the Hyuuga with every breath. And she left this plane of existence with a final death wish to be fulfilled. Do you want to know what it was – her last wish?" In a blink of an eye, Jubei had suddenly disappeared from where he was sitting on the large rock, and reappeared directly in front of Hiashi.

"The complete annihilation of the Hyuuga clan..." With those words, Jubei attacked the vulnerable and still incoherent Hiashi.

Moment's later; Neji and Hinata finally stumbled upon the scene between Jubei and Hiashi. What they saw shocked them. There was Hiashi, huffing, bleeding, injured and bruised, kneeling on one leg on the dirty floor. His right eye was closed as blood slowly ran down his face from a cut on his forehead and his left arm looked as if it was broken in several different places (1). Hinata had been so stunned at the appearance of her father that she literally froze in shock. Neji, however, had immediately reverted to the traditions hounded into his subconscious mind from an early age – as a member of the Hyuuga Branch House, it was his duty to protect members of the Main house, and this includes the leader of the main house.

Rushing into the fray, Neji jumped in front of the prone form of Hiashi and glared furiously at the almost languidly standing Jubei before him. "WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE!" Neji yelled, angry that someone had dared attack a member of the Hyuuga Clan, the strongest clan in the entire Leaf Village.

Jubei continued to give the boy a sadistic smirk. "I'm just getting rid of old rubbish. You better get out of my way, boy, or you're next, whether or not you're main or branch house." Glancing over at the still frozen Hinata, Jubei's smirk became even crueler. "Or shall I let you watch as I torture your cousin first before killing both of you?"

"YOU BxxTARD!" In a fit of uncontrolled fury, Neji lashed out towards Jubei, hands out in an offensive Gentle Fist stance.

"NEJI! STOP! NOW!" Hiashi desperately called out but Neji wasn't hearing any of it.

Finally, when Neji has reached Jubei within a certain distance, Neji thrust a single palm towards Jubei's unprotected chest. In an instant, Jubei had disappeared once again and reappeared by Neji's side. With his Byakugan activated, Neji quickly saw Jubei but was not fast

enough to counter the Air Nin's move. Jubei thrust two open palms onto Neji's side followed by a single point strike from his fingers. Using the momentum of the strikes, Neji jumped away but the damage had already been done. The younger boy struggled to breathe properly as he discovered that two of his ribs had been cracked and the bones punctured his right lung, not only that, but an important tenketsu in that area of his body has been forcefully closed and burnt by that final strike.

Straightening himself for a second barrage of fights, Neji and Jubei were both suddenly stopped by Hinata's frantic plea to stop. "STOP IT BOTH OF YOU! WHY ARE YOU FIGHTING? JUST STOP! PLEASE!"

Pausing in mid run, both boys shifted their gaze from each other to the tearful Hinata. "Please. Stop this. It's a meaningless fight..." Hinata murmured, tears freely flowing from her eyes.

Neji glared towards Jubei again. "But *he's* the one that attacked first. He hurt Hiashi-sama. And I'm not going to stand for it!" Ready to fight again, this time, Neji was stopped by a direct order from Hiashi.

"I said STOP IT! Step down Neji, this is not your fight!" Hiashi's commanding voice rang out through the clearing. Even though the battered looking man rested on the dirty floor, he still retained an air of nobility and constant call for respect.

"But!" Neji tried to protest only to be cut off by Hiashi a second time. However, this time was different, Hiashi revealed a secret that not many people in Konoha had ever known. "I said NO, Neji. I will not have you charge towards my son (2) like a raving maniac, show some restraint! He is far superior to you. There is no way you can defeat him."

The silence that followed that exclamation was deafening.

"Your... what...?" A soft voice whispered from some distance away from the four currently arguing people. Soon, over twenty Hyuuga Guards from both the Main and Branch houses of the Hyuuga Clan appeared, surrounding the wounded Hiashi and Neji, the stunned to silence Hinata and the still standing nonchalantly Jubei. However, there was also one child present. Hanabi had been the one to voice the initial question.

Jubei snorted at their shocked expressions. "Don't get any ideas. This man may be my sire. But I am no Hyuuga. My name is Dokudes Jubei; I am my mother's son – Dokudes Hina. And my purpose here in Konoha is to see to the destruction of the Hyuuga clan."

Seeing that his speech hadn't done anything to disrupt the stillness in the air, Jubei sighed disappointedly. "Looks like you have a lot of explaining to do, Hiashi-teme (Hiashi Bxxtard) (3). I'll leave you alive for tonight. But be certain that before I leave Konoha, the Hyuuga will fall." And with that said, a flick of a spinning golden ring later and Jubei had completely disappeared from the clearing. Even with their Byakugan activated, the guards could not find any trace of the boy.

After a few minutes of useless searching, Hiashi motioned for everyone to return to the Hyuuga compound, only then would his injuries be taken care of before he begins to explain just what the hell was going on. It was certain that the Hyuuga council would not be happy with the results of this confrontation. Not only that, but that the Hyuuga Clan may also suffer much public outcry once this secret was revealed not only to the Hyuuga personnel, but also to the rest of the population living in the Hidden Leaf Village. It was time for the truth to be told. And since Hina was already dead, Hiashi had nothing left to hold back his own anguish and lash out at the decisions made so very long ago – decisions that have lead to repercussions even now. It was time for the lie to end and for the truth to be revealed.

Back at the Hyuuga estate, Hiashi could be found sitting at the forefront of the large meeting room, with over 50 percent of all

Hyuuga residents were in attendance. Everyone was shocked at the bandaged state that Hiashi was found in, but with a firm cough, no one dared to voice any enquiries. It was here that Hiashi made his challenge to the old ruling of the Hyuuga Council; here he made his choice to expose how deep his sins truly ran.

Lowering his eyes towards the side, Hiashi met the frozen gaze of his eldest daughter. Hinata hadn't spoken a single word since his initial announcement during the fight between Neji and Jubei. Beside his daughter sat Neji, stiff as a board with eyes angry and confused, unwavering in their questions. Next to Neji sat his youngest daughter. Hanabi still looked very pale in comparison to her normal shade of skin tone. She still hadn't recovered from the shock of his statement it seems, and he couldn't blame her.

Producing a heavy sigh and slumping his shoulders slightly, Hiashi began his story. "Some of you may have already heard and other may have heard rumours, but no matter what conceptions you may have, I will reconfirm the truth here and now. There is a boy currently within Konoha – around the ages of 17 or 18, with the name of Dokudes Jubei. He is indeed my illegitimate son." Instantly, a wave of whispers and mummers were heard from the entire room. Gasps of surprise could be heard while many others voiced their disbelief at the news.

Raising his hand sharply, Hiashi silenced the entire room before he continued on with his story. "Almost twenty years ago, there was an ambassador from the Hidden Air Village that visited and settled in Konoha, discussing trade deals, exchange of philosophy and peace talks between the Leaf and the Air. As some of you may know, before this ambassador, the last contact the Leaf village had ever had with the Air was Tsunade-sama herself, who was welcomed as the apprentice of one of the members of the previous Uzumaki ruling family." Pausing slightly, Hiashi soon finished his introduction with a single sentence. "The ambassador that came was a woman by the name of Dokudes Hina."

Pausing in his speech, Hiashi closed his eyes and swallowed the agony of remembering the first time he had ever met Hina. She was like an angel, a warrior and the perfect vision of a woman he had ever met, all in one package. She was strong, beautiful and passionate, so very different from all the women of the Hyuuga Clan. She was everything that Hiashi wasn't. And though at first they didn't get along, it wasn't long before Hiashi realised he found himself attracted to the short, violet haired vixen. "I first met her at an official welcoming ceremony held at the Hokage Tower's function room, where Yondaime still ruled at the time. She was beautiful... but headstrong, stubborn and held enough power to match her station. She was prideful too, perhaps more so than us. After all, she came from a long line of a very powerful bloodline clan, the Dokudes Clan, the poison handlers."

"Due to his own Hokage duties at the time, Yondaime had assigned me as Hina's main guard and guide around Konoha. However, due to our clash in personality, we fought a lot on many issues, and yet we found we enjoyed each other's company very much. She was the first woman to have ever managed to punch me and give me a black eye. I was impressed." A few nervous chuckles emitted through out the room, but most were silent and held all of their attention on Hiashi's words. The councillors however, were furious that Hiashi would dare bring up this long lost secret.

"It wasn't long that I fell in love with her." In the corner of his eye, he watched as both Hinata and Hanabi flinched at his words, finally understanding why he had been so cold to their mother when she was still alive. They had never really understood why Hiashi had married a woman who had fathered him two daughters but never really gave her much attention, if any at all. Finally, they knew the reason why their mother had always been depressed and unhappy about her marriage with Hiashi. It was an arranged marriage; both participants had never really loved each other at all. As such, the marriage was doomed from the very beginning.

"I decided to court Hina, without asking permission from the Hyuuga Council as I didn't think they would have objected to the joining of two such powerful bloodlines. The Dokudes are a famous and powerful clan; the addition of their blood into ours would be a bonus for Konoha. I didn't think we had anything to lose and so I continued to court Hina. After nearly two years of courtship, Hina finally gave her consent to marry me. However, she gave a condition – one which I had never heard of before, and one that broke apart my plans instantly."

"There is a rule in the Hidden Air Village, all persons who marry to a member of the Air, **MUST RETURN TO THE AIR WITH THEIR SPOUSE!** It doesn't matter if it was an outside male who married to a female from the Kuunoki, or an outside female who married to a male from the Kuunoki. Both spouses have to return and get approval from their own 7 High Councillors for the marriage to be legitimate."

"I started having doubts that the Hyuuga council would agree to this arrangement. After all, I am of the main house and not only that, the heir to become the next Clan head. However, Hina was already pregnant with my child at the time, I could not refuse her request... and I didn't think that the Hyuuga would ever reject one of their own blood... I was wrong." Hiashi's deep voice echoed through out the chamber, easily expressing his anger, resentment and disappointment from all those years ago. He was too naïve, and for his naivety, Hina suffered.

"When I first made the request to the Hyuuga council, they refused to grant me permission to wed Hina. No matter how much I argued with them that Hina is already pregnant with my child, they would not listen. It wasn't until I threatened to bring the truth of the matter to none other than Yondaime Hokage-sama that they finally receded their decision and granted my wish. However, I was naïve... I was stupid to think that the long years of tradition would be so easily swept aside for one young man's desire." Hiashi's voice slowly rose higher and louder than before, expressing passion and strong

emotions that not many had ever had the chance to witness on his usually controlled behaviour.

"The day the Yondaime Hokage and Sandaime Hokage both left Konoha to attend the Chuunin Exams, held in the country of the Mist... was the day the Hyuuga Councils finally implemented their own plans for myself, Hina and our unborn child. During a family meal, I was drugged and dragged away. However, Hina, being a member of the Dokudes Clan, was immune to poisons and drugs. So while I was taken away, she fought against the Hyuuga Clansman that tried to kill her."

Gasps of shock were once again heard around the room before it was quickly silenced once again by Hiashi's now wavering voice, expressing deep regret and self-loathing for he was unable to help at the time. "She fought with all her pride, ability and strength. But being three months pregnant, she was quickly losing stamina. Knowing she was running out of options, she managed to escape this very Hyuuga compound with both her life and the fragile life inside of her, swearing that she would return to rescue her husband-to-be."

"After regaining my senses, I immediately demanded an explanation from the Hyuuga Councillors. But I was alone, and powerless to stop them. No one else from the main or branch houses had noticed my absence and no one knew of my predicament... They gave me an ultimatum. If I would completely reject the claims of a relationship between Hina and myself, as well as reject the claims of the unborn child as my own, then they would let Hina live and return to the Air village peacefully. If I refused, they would hunt down and kill both Hina and my child."

The silence that filled the room held an atmosphere of steel and icy tension. "Knowing that Hina would be unable to face the entire Hyuuga Clan in her current condition, I chose the former. I had thought that perhaps... in the future, I would have my revenge on the council and somehow reunite with Hina and my child. Again... I was wrong."

"Two days later, Hina managed to make contact with me. She wanted me to leave Konoha with her and return to the Air effective immediately. She asked me to drop my duty, my pride, my responsibility to the clan and the village to go with her. I refused. I didn't tell her the ultimatum given by the Councillors, because I didn't want to worry her nor have her in danger. I had hoped that once the child was safely born, then we could meet again and be happy." Giving another heavy sigh, Hiashi shook his head despondently. "I was so very young and stupid. I made another mistake that night."

"By rejecting Hina's offer to leave with her... after all the trouble she had gone through to come get me... hurt her far beyond my expectations. She saw my words as a betrayal of our love for each other and she stormed away before I could really explain anything. I didn't go after her... I had thought that was it; the Councillors would leave her alone. Again, I was wrong." Hiashi's voice almost cranked under the strain of his emotions and he shut his eyes tightly to rid himself of the images of Hina's tearful and vengeful face. Fury, hurt and betrayal dancing in her fiery violet eyes like blazing winds. She was so beautiful, especially when she was angry and emotional, but Hiashi would never have the chance to see her again. All he had were memories that erode with time, just memories he was too scared to face and yet didn't dare to let go, memories that still haunt him to this day.

"That very night, some miles outside of Konoha, assassins lay in wait for Hina's emergence from the Gates. They were assassins employed by the Hyuuga Council for the sole purpose of killing Hina and my son. I had not known of this plan." Swallowing a painful lump in his throat, Hiashi determinately continued. "Many died in the attack... But it wasn't until days later, when one of the surviving assassins returned to Konoha and met with the councillors and myself for 'payment' that I became suspicious. I asked what was for the payment, and the man told me: 'Even though the mission was unsuccessful, the team and I managed to do enough damage to make sure of her impending doom. It's for the death of a pregnant

violet haired woman and her unborn child.' I killed that man in cold blood."

The steel tight atmosphere in the air had dropped several degrees and became very cold, like ice. "As it was a unanimous decision by all the Hyuuga Councillors, I was outvoted for calling in punishment following the actions of the attempted murder. At the same time, the council also threatened to hurt the life and family of my younger brother – Hyuuga Hizashi, if I did not keep this disgrace a secret from the Hokage, the rest of the Hyuuga Clan and the entire populous of the Leaf. When the Yondaime returned, he was only told that Hina had left due to an important message sent from the Air. It was all a lie. A façade, complete and utter falsehood."

"And now... almost 20 years after the supposed death of the first and only woman I had ever loved, I found out my son is alive. And his name... is Dokudes Jubei." Finally looking up at his avid audience. Hiashi concluded his story. "I sincerely apologise to all of you for holding in such a secret for so long. All those years of pretending nothing had happened, of thinking my child was dead... it was all a lie. And now that I have seen him with my own eyes, I will recognise him as my eldest and true son. I also... hereby announce that Dokudes Jubei is the true heir to the Hyuuga Clan!"

Immediately, cries of outrage could be heard from all sides of the room. Seemingly unnoticed, there were two children sitting in one corner of the room who had paled considerably due to the announcement. Both Hinata and Hanabi had turned sickly looking, more so than their normal pale complexion. However, they were ignored by the outcries that continued to fill the room. Silently, Hinata stood on wobbly legs; she pulled her almost catatonic sister up to her feet. Slowly but surely, Hinata left the Chamber, pulling her numb sister along with her. There was nothing else that she needed to hear. There was nothing more she needed to do, nothing at all. She was no longer the heiress of the Hyuuga. For a small moment, Hinata felt free... truly... utterly free from all her responsibilities, duties and expectations. She no longer had to bare the disappointed

looks on her father's face or on any of the other Hyuuga member's faces. And more importantly, she no longer cared. / *This isn't my problem anymore... I just can't find the strength to care... /*

Still back in the room, Neji watched quietly as the dazed figures of Hinata and Hanabi both stumbled away from the chaos that had erupted in the Chamber. He didn't know what to do... he just didn't know what to do anymore...

The next day, rumours, gossip and all sorts of talk had spread all through out Konoha on the subject of this huge Hyuuga conspiracy. It had soon become the hype of the entire village. Never in history had the Hyuuga clan ever been persecuted for such a large crime before, and the populous were curious as to what their punishments should be now that the truth had been revealed. And more importantly than that, there were hectic rumours about the new Hyuuga heir that Hiashi had announced himself – a bxxtard child whose mother was a Ninja of the Hidden Air village. Clearly, the reputation of the Hyuuga would be completely obliterated by the end of this day.

Back in the Hyuuga complex, both Hinata and Hanabi had hardly left their rooms to roam the corridors of their own house. All of a sudden, their place, their disposition, probably their entire existence had been displaced by the announcement. No longer were they fighting over the position of the Hyuuga heir, no longer did their sibling rivalry (on Hanabi's part at least) held any meaning. / *What is there to live for now?* / Hanabi thought continuously to herself.

As for Hinata, she was under a different kind of depression. Since the revealing of Jubei's true status as Hinata's half brother, Hinata had quickly assimilated the truth and whole-heartedly accepted the boy as her elder. However, this also brought to light all her memories of her own mother. Why her mother had tried so desperately to win the favour of her father, and yet never capable of defeating the image of a deceased lover that her father still carried with him til this

day and age. / *Why... What is my purpose now... born between a couple with no love, and now displaced in my own family... who am I... what am I to become now...* / Confusion and self doubt began to nibble at Hinata's confidence and sense of self.

She remembered a time when she had been asking her mother a seemingly innocent question, but got in return something that held more depth than she could ever imagine at her young age.

(FLASHBACK)

" Mommy, what does my name mean?" the four-year-old girl inquired innocently.

The gentle but tired smile on the face of her mother stilted slightly, but the lady soon forced out another, more strained smile. "Why do you ask that, my little Hotaru?"

Forgetting her initial question, Hinata's confused face looked back at her mother as another issue popped into her mind. "Mommy, why do you always call me 'Hotaru'? And everyone else calls me 'Hinata-sama'?"

Even the strained smile disappeared, but the lone mother tried her best to answer truthfully anyway. "I've always wanted to name you 'Hotaru', 'Hyuuga Hotaru'. But your otou-sama named you 'Hinata' instead." She explained patiently, determined to hide the pain in her voice.

" Why? Why did Otou-sama give me that name?" The child was beyond curious and determined to get some answers back.

Looking away, the lady's eyes darkened slightly with pain. "He named you after someone very important to him. You were suppose to their replacement..." Quickly wiping away a single tear that threatened to flow out of her eyes, the lady looked back gently at Hinata. "Please don't ask me anymore questions, my little 'Hotaru'. I'm tired, let me rest?"

" Okay, mommy."

(END FLASHBACK)

It was with painful realisation that Hinata discovered she was named after 'Dokudes Hina', her father's previous lover. *I Was I only meant to be a replacement? Is that why he was always so disappointed when I fail in everything I do? 'Hina' was suppose to be some sort of powerful, beautiful and determined lady. I'm nothing like that, nothing like what father wanted me to be... I*

A soft knock interrupted both girls' thoughts. And without waiting for a reply, the door was smoothly opened to reveal none other than Hiashi standing behind it. Taking several careful steps forward, Hiashi gently shut the door behind and looked forward to his two daughters.

"Hinata. Hanabi. How are you two today? I haven't seen you both around lately and the servants have become concerned over your health." He explained in a monotone voice, careful to keep some distance between himself and his daughters.

Unable and unwilling to let go of the dream to become the next Hyuuga Heir, Hanabi stood forward, bowed respectfully to her father and asked in a timid voice. "Is it true? Are we no longer in competition for the role of Hyuuga heir?" Her normally piercing eyes gazed on with hopeful tremor, praying that her father still had some value in her, still cherished her for being herself, even if she couldn't be the Hyuuga heir.

Looking back indifferently, Hiashi answered. "Yes. During last night's meeting, I called for a vote of no confidence in the decisions and power held by the Hyuuga councillors. There was a referendum held by all adult Hyuuga members, and the vote was unanimous. The Hyuuga councillors were outvoted and have been restricted to house arrest, their powers stripped away from their very hands. Now, I'm going to be setting up a new set of internal councillors with support from the Hokage as well as some of the other, more influential clans

in Konoha. Debate on the issue of the Hyuuga heir has been pushed aside for the moment being, but I'm sure that after what everyone had witnessed as Jubei's strength, he would no doubt be voted into the position without objection."

Hanabi's face fell at the declaration, her hopes dashed. She now knew that her status as his daughter did not matter. Nothing mattered in his eyes anymore. After all, **they** weren't the daughters of Dokudes Hina, and as such, they're worth were second rated to his first born son. It didn't matter that they were pure blood Hyuugas or how powerful they truly are. It did not matter that she had been trained for the position since birth. They simply couldn't compare because all Hiashi has his eyes on now was to reconcile his differences with his long lost son. Nothing else mattered, not reason, not logic, nothing. And it hurts. It hurts when you know that the one person you have always looked up to and idolised like a god was going to abandon you for something he perceives as better than you. She was nothing if not his heir. And without that title, it would be better if she simply ceased to exist.

Hinata's face however, showed a thin veil of anger at the hurt expression on Hanabi's face. */ He has no right to treat her like that! He has NO RIGHT! /* She swore to herself mentally. Hinata had always been looked down upon and ridiculed by her father, so she was use to the feeling of being abandoned. But Hanabi wasn't like her. And seeing her younger sister's crushed face, Hinata felt an overwhelming hate for her father. */ If he wanted to hurt me, fine, I can take it. But what gives him the RIGHT TO HURT HANABI TOO! Are we only tools in his eyes! Are we nothing to him at all! /* The fury built to such a level that Hinata just couldn't contain it anymore.

"And you think that *he* will just go along with your plans without complaint?" Hinata's retort was scathing in its attack. "He HATES YOU! He would never join forces with you! Have you forgotten what he said to you before? He says that he will see the 'Hyuuga fall'! He would rather destroy the entire Hyuuga clan! He would never..." However, before Hinata could continue the rest of her argument, her

father had stomped forward and slapped her straight across the face.

The stunned silence in the air held for a long moment, all three members in the room too shocked by their own actions to move or speak. Choking slightly, Hinata slowly lifted her hand to her now reddened face. Never had Hiashi ever lifted a hand against his daughters, unless it was in the situation of training. No matter how angry he had been, he had never managed to strike his own children before. And now, over such a menial issue, his anger had rose to uncontrolled levels, enough for him to strike out instinctively.

A few minutes after the incident, Hiashi seemed to have managed to recompose himself. "Enough. As long as you live under this roof, you WILL obey my orders. The issue on Jubei is closed; do you understand me? It doesn't matter to me if he wants me dead or if he wants to destroy the Hyuuga Clan. Truthfully, once he becomes the heir, it'll be as easy as a single order to ensure the destruction of the Hyuuga. But that would be his choice, his decision. I will not stop him. This is his birthright!" Hiashi's calm posture had slowly turned to one of anger and fury, his expression completely tempered by a glint of madness and revenge shining in his eyes (4).

And in this moment of intimidated clarity, Hinata finally understood what her father wanted to do. Revenge was his only goal. Revenge not only against the Hyuuga councillors, but the entire Clan as well. "Why?" She whispered. "Why! What have the rest of us ever done to you? Why are you punishing the entire Clan? I can understand why Jubei would want to find some way to kill us all, but... but you... you were born of the clan, who were bred as a clansman, who led the clan! Why?" Hinata exclaimed, desperately trying to understand her father's logic, if there was any logic behind his decisions.

And after a long moment of silence, Hiashi finally deigned to speak. It seems as if he had decided to explain his reasons without further pushing. "I hate it." These were the first words that left his mouth. "I hate it being a Hyuuga. I hate the rules, the customs, and the traditions."

"I hate it. And this time, this time there's nothing left for me to hold on to this façade of power and authority anymore. Hina's dead. My brother's dead. My son hates my existence... there's nothing left for me here either. But I can't leave... not until I am killed or if someone replaces me. And of all the worthy people in this world, the only person I would give the honour of killing me is my own son. But to do that without persecuting him against the laws of the Hyuuga, he must become the next heir." Hiashi's eyes glazed with mind numbing visions. As if he was living in a dream, a dream where he was the director, the producer and the script writer, creating and entertaining himself with a film that stars only him and his desires. Nothing mattered to him anymore, nothing at all.

Looking back at the two young girls with the same glazed expression, Hiashi mumbled. "I'm sure you're both familiar with the history of the Hyuuga Clan. There have been cases where the heir kills their own father and siblings in order to claim the title as Clan head. This is no different. I will give Jubei the authority to wreck as much havoc as he likes on the Hyuuga. In return, he would give us death... and finally, I would have the chance to be with my Hina, once and for all. It's poetic justice, isn't it?" He chuckled insanely for a moment. "Once again, fate has predetermined my destiny, which is to die by my own son's hand. That, I can accept."

Looking at the madness dancing in her father's eyes, Hinata became scared, terrified of what her father had become. Ever since the night of Jubei's attack, her father had changed. He had completely given up on his own life, and slowly fallen into the depths of insanity. And here was her proof. Hiashi would willingly sacrifice the entire Clan just so that he would have the freedom of death. */ No! I will not be any part of this. I refuse! /* And with that thought in mind, Hinata quickly stood up to her full height, her eyes glaring at her father with a new determination never been seen before.

"You said that anyone living under this roof must obey you. Then I QUIT! I am no longer your daughter and I refuse to live under the same roof as you! I will not stand for this insanity. I will not partake in

this madness of yours! And more importantly, I will not let you hurt the people around you!" She exclaimed proudly, clearly and full of resolve.

Hiashi only gave her a vague stare. "Suit yourself. Pack up your things and leave." Turning around swiftly, Hiashi left through the door he had come in from, completely ignoring the existence of his younger daughter, who had paled to such an extent that she almost looked like a corpse.

A few seconds after Hiashi's departure, Hanabi broke. Dropping down to her knees, the little girl was wracked by uncontrolled sobs, tears freely raining down her face in torrents, her breathing hitched to such an extent that she found it difficult to breathe, her body shaking in shock and an overabundance of emotions. Dreams shattering, abandoned and alone, Hanabi thought to herself that this was the lowest point in her life. That is, until warm arms wrapped around her in a comfortable embrace. Feeling the sudden sensation of being safe and secure, Hanabi quickly leaned into her sister's embrace, clutching on her shirts like a lifeline. Slowly but surely, the sobs subsided, and in the end, left only an exhausted Hanabi and Hinata. Quietly, Hinata whispered to her younger sister: "Tonight, we leave." And Hanabi could only nod in response. There was no reason for them to stay here anymore. The Hyuuga Clan was falling apart right in front of them and there was nothing they could do about it, nothing at all.

That night, as promised, both Hinata and Hanabi left the Hyuuga compound.

Unbeknownst to them, they were watched vigilantly by Hiashi, who had watched their progress from the window of his room, overlooking the entire compound from one of the higher towers. There, tears soon fell from his unblinking eyes, but he didn't acknowledge them. After all, it was better that they had left the Hyuuga clan. They were innocents and as such, didn't deserve to be punished with the rest of

them. Soon, he turned away from the window and returned to bed, never wiping away the tears that stained his face.

"Where will we go? One-san?" Hanabi's unusually timid voice resounded around the empty streets.

"I... we... we'll go see the Hokage-sama first. See if we can have our own apartment, even if it is a small one." Stumbling at first, Hinata soon found her firm resolve to look after both herself and her younger sister. There's just no way around it, as the eldest, it was her responsibility.

"But... aren't we still having problems with housing and stuff, I don't think they'll be any vacancies, at least not yet..." Looking pleadingly at Hinata, Hanabi struggled to find any hope in this situation. She truly was lost in all this chaos and sudden madness.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with hoping..." Hinata said. Though outwardly calm and determined, within Hinata's heart was a lump of turmoil, confusion and fear.

Suddenly, a clear voice called out from some distance behind him. "Hinata! Hanabi!"

Looking back, Hinata exclaimed in surprise. "Na... Naruto-kun?"

Naruto's unexpected appearance upon the scene was followed by none other than a quiet member of the Gate Guardians behind him – Kaiba Mishizu. The sisters paused in their movement waiting for Naruto and his companion to catch up to them. Once they were only a few meters away from each other, Naruto spoke up again. "You will be coming with me. Don't worry, Tsunade already knows."

The abrupt explanation tore Hinata out of her musings with shock. "WHAT! How... How did you know?" Completely astonished by Naruto's firm command, Hinata was suddenly suspicious of why Naruto appeared all of a sudden. She really wouldn't put it past her

father to have somehow manipulated the entire fiasco to kick her out of the Hyuuga clan. At times, when the need arrives, her father could be just as manipulative and heartless as the cruellest person on earth, she would know.

"I have my ways." Naruto answered ambiguously. After a short pause in suspicious, Naruto sighed tiredly, his shoulders slumped in exhaustion and he looked at Hinata with weary eyes. "I'm really sorry, I knew that Jubei's presence would affect your father that way, I knew what the consequences would affect the entire Hyuuga Clan and to you as well. But... this was preordained. It's just one of those destinies that have been written by fate, and because of that, it would be VERY difficult to change. Again, I'm sorry I couldn't protect you more." Naruto looked down at the ground in shame. Behind him, Mishizu made no sound and no action to show her own opinion on the matter.

At the strange apology, Hinata's suspicions quickly flittered away, leaving only awe and acceptance. Thinking back to all the time she had known the enigmatic Uzumaki heir, Hinata realised that he must have used his 'gift' in order to observe what would happen. After all, she had been with him during that tour of the old Uchiha residency when he first used his 'seeing' abilities. And even then, it had shocked her knowing he had such gifts. It was truly both a 'gift' and a 'curse', to know that some things will happen and yet being unable to stop it. It just wasn't fair. To her, Hinata would prefer being ignorant than with the ability to predict the future any day.

"You've done more than enough, Naruto-kun." She answered understandingly, knowing he must have gone out of his way to try and protect her from the future as much as possible, even going so far as to keep the presence of Jubei a secret from the Hyuuga Clan. She had been surprised at first that it was her and Neji's announcement which finally rose her father's curiosity, but it finally dawned on her that Naruto must have done something to keep Jubei's presence a secret from almost every single Hyuuga member while during the three months they were residing in Konoha. It was

an incredible feat, one that she was truly grateful for, no matter what the outcome.

Releasing another sigh, Naruto smiled at Hinata tiredly but not as depressed as before. "From now on, both of you will be under my protection. And consequently, you will be under the protection of the Gate Guardians. Until the day I release you from my protection, that is." He told them pointedly as if he was sure that they would agree to this contract. And indeed, the Hyuuga siblings did accept the finality of this contract, as they really didn't have much a choice.

(To be continued.)

(1) I know that some of you will complain later on that Hiashi isn't that weak. I admit - I kinda made him far more injured than expected. But understand this, Hiashi DOESN'T WANT TO FIGHT! So he hasn't been using his full power to fight Jubei as he doesn't really want to hurt Jubei. On another hand, Hiashi is still in shock at Hina's death, so he isn't really in the right mind for a fight to begin with. With Hina's death, Hiashi also finally comprehends how much Jubei really hates him, and this added pain for facing Jubei's hate also disrupts Hiashi's fighting ability. Therefore, the results are as I described. You can call it a bit OOC, but to me, I've always believed Hiashi to be weak at heart, and when he faces something he doesn't want to face (like the death of his brother – Hizashi) he makes terrible mistakes.

(2) Yeah! Finally, the secret is out! Now, for those of you who haven't read Jubei's profile on my website's page because you don't want to be spoilt, you can now.

(3) Influenced from how Naruto is always calling Sasuke – "Sasuke-teme". I'm assuming this means "Sasuke – Bastard".

(4) Please bare with me, I'm making Hiashi rather insane at the moment and definitely OOC. He needed to be though. My reasons for doing this – I see Hiashi as a guy who has been working under a lot of pressure for a very long time and has suddenly found out that

all his effort, his hope was for naught. The thing he wanted the most – Hina – would never be his. And not only that, but the entire incident has come back to bite him in the butt – namely, Jubei (his only son and one he loved simply because he was the shared offspring between him and Hina) hates his guts. Basically, he finds out that everything he has been fighting for always seems to turn around and eventually hurts him in the end. So he has a lot of anger, anger at himself, anger at the Councillors, and anger at the Clan in general. So during this VERY stressful time, Hiashi cracks. He wants to give Jubei anything and everything the boy wants in a strange attempt to win back the boy's affections. And if the boy wants to destroy the Hyuuga, so be it, Hiashi would help him. Remember, this man is NOT thinking straight. He has abandoned all of his previous morals and thinking as they have led him nowhere except pain. He's completely and utterly lost in his own anguish and doesn't really know what is the best action to take, so he takes the easiest route, the way to destruction. Once everything ends, then he doesn't have to care anymore. So yeah, psycho Hiashi on the way, people!

Oooh... And the plot thickens.

My worst chapter yet... but... I got a lot of the stuff on the Hyuuga finally out of the way. Next chapter, confrontations – What will become of the Hyuugas?

And by the way... MERRY CHRISTMAS! EVERYONE AND HAVE A HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Preview of the next chapter:

" Technically speaking, what Hiashi is trying to do is simply illegal. In the constitution of the Hyuuga Clan written many years ago, only a pure blood Hyuuga can become the leader of the Clan. And not only that, any change to the Hyuuga leader or to the constitution must be amended by a majority vote by the Hyuuga council. Since Hiashi had supposedly abolished the power structure of the Hyuuga Council, what he is doing is in effect – a dictatorship. You can be sure that

both the Hokage and many of the higher ranked clans will not support this method of control. He simply cannot win."

" Looks like I'm turning more and more like Aunt Ruri. Heh. I'm even starting to manipulate people like her..." Naruto sighed wearily, tired beyond belief. "When will this end..."

Resolution I

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Nineteen: Resolution I

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ',
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: OOC for a lot of characters – Hinata, Hanabi, Naruto, Hiashi, etc. A LOT of TALKING in this chapter and NO ACTION!

Apologies for the long wait. I'm still pretty stuck on a major writer's block. I cannot guarantee when the next chapter will come up. Hopefully, I'll have all this Hyuuga Business finished and over with next chapter and then I can start planning out for the Special Chuunin Exam hosted – for the first time ever – by the Hidden Air Village itself. I'll also have to work on the relationship between Hinata and Jubei... *sigh* It's a never ending job.

Anyway, I really have to apologise again for the damn SHORTNESS of this chapter. I would have written more ... maybe ... but it would have been an even longer wait and I don't think you guys deserve that, no matter how cruel I can be at times, I'm not THAT cruel. Hope you like this almost pointless and actionless chapter. I'm just moving the plot along as fast as I can. This poor chapter had been rewritten so many times, I've lost count.

I remember one reviewer saying that the story was lacking in the romance department. Well, to answer your question, I'm terrible at

writing romance. I'm just not good at it. But I promise I will try – which is another reason why this chapter was so slow, I re-added an entire section that helped develop the character interactions between Naruto and Hinata. I hope you liked it.

Chapter 19

Both Hinata and Hanabi tentatively took a few steps forward and arrived in the sparsely decorated room that is Naruto's living room in his newly developed apartment. Sparsely decorated being the key term. Though the room wasn't very small by any standard, there was only a single couch and small table in the middle of the room, followed by a very small bookshelf filled with the brim by books and scrolls. That, and two plants stationed beside the large, single glass door that leads to the balcony outside. The room was brightly lit by the large, new lamplight hanging from the centre of the room. And with the light, the rest of the apartment was revealed.

There was a connecting kitchen and laundry room to their right, of which was next to a small bathroom and toilet. To their left were two walled rooms with their doors closed at the moment, supposedly the bedrooms – one belonging to Naruto and the next one probably propped up for the two sisters themselves.

"As you can probably guess, the two rooms to your left are the bedrooms." Naruto indicated with a flick of his wrist as he walked in behind the two silent figures. He didn't look back at their tense expressions when he turned into the kitchen, supposedly to make some tea or whatnot in order to relax everyone. "The first door belongs to both you and Hanabi, Hinata. The one next to yours is my bedroom. If you ever need anything just knock." Pausing as he inspected the mix match of herbal tea in the teapot, Naruto, finally satisfied with his special brew, heated up the water in order to be added to the tea blend. Looking up, he noticed that the siblings were still standing there right in front of the opening door. "Please! Take a seat." Indicating the couch with his chin, Naruto opened a cupboard to bring out three brand new glass cups. "Make yourselves

comfortable, this place will be home for a while and I want you both to feel welcomed."

Hesitantly moving across the room and sitting lightly on the beige couch, Hinata couldn't help but blush slightly at the thought of her entering a boy's apartment, and not just any boy – her crush's apartment. Hanabi on the other hand, was just a little bit too tired due to the emotional roller coaster ride she had lived through just that afternoon, to really care about anything that's happening to her at the moment. She didn't even have the strength to think about whether or not she would be safe living with this complete stranger.

Returning to the living room area and seeing that the couch has been taken up by the siblings, Naruto simply placed the teapot and cups down onto the table before flopping down onto the floor in front of the siblings. Eyeing them closely, Naruto none the less noticed Mishizu's quiet presence standing by the side, leaning casually against the wall, as if trying to blend into the newly painted wooden walls itself.

Noticing that the boy had nowhere to sit after she and Hanabi had taken up the couch, Hinata's face reddened slightly in embarrassment. "Ano... I'm sorry, Naruto-kun... Taking up your couch like that. Here..." Intending to stand up and let the boy have his couch back, Hinata's well-intentioned move was waved away casually by Naruto's hand. He gave her a gentle smile before ensuring that he was fine on the floor, in fact he spends more time on the floor than on the couch anyway.

Taking a sip of the newly brewed tea, Hinata was amazed by the delightful aroma that wafted from her tea. She was even more surprised by the sweet yet gentle taste of the tea itself. In an instant, her nerves were calmed quite drastically. "Ano. Thank you Naruto-kun... For the tea, that is." She flushed again, but this time, the red hue wasn't as fierce as normal.

"I'm glad you like it." Naruto answered back as he too, took a sip of his tea.

Hanabi was the only one not willing to drink the concoction. She still wasn't a hundred percent sure she could trust this stranger. Unwilling to bare the quiet in the air (intercepted by the sounds of sipping tea), Hanabi finally decided to just blurt out her concerns. "So. Who are you? What do you want with us? And why do you care?"

Tensing at her sister's sudden rebuff, Hinata tried to apologize for Hanabi's rudeness only to be waved off by Naruto once again. Placing his tea gently down, Naruto's face grew serious and he looked into Hanabi's blank eyes for a moment. Though the young girl tried to hide it behind a mask of defeat and loss, Naruto could still see the raw hurt and betrayal she was still grappling with internally. He sympathised with her completely and that was one of the reasons why he didn't want to see such a dead face on one so young.

"My name is Uzumaki Naruto. I am a Konoha Chuunin, newly promoted. I was also one of the Rookie Nine Genins like your sister. However, I am also the heir apparent to the Uzumaki line, and future leader of the Hidden Air Village." Pausing to let the information sink in, Naruto soon decided to direct the conversation to something more relevant to the two girls. "Dokudes Jubei is one of my subordinates. He is one of the 10 Gate Guardians sent here by my Aunt and current leader of the Hidden Air Village, to protect 'me' from any outside harm. As such, the confrontation between your father and Jubei could 'theoretically' be my fault. And of course, the subsequent events following that incident could directly link back to me."

"As for what I want. I don't want anything from you, if that's what you mean. I want peace between the Hidden Air Village and the Hidden Leaf Village. They are both my homes, and I do not ever want to choose one over the other. Why do I care? As I just explained, I feel slightly responsible for everything that happened to you and..." Naruto continued his explanations in a gentle voice before he was rudely interrupted.

"We don't need your pity!" Hanabi demanded, as she stood as tall as her small frame allowed, glaring angrily at Naruto. She was about to

storm out the door when her arm was being firmly gripped by her older sister, stopping her from any movement. Looking back, Hanabi was surprised at seeing the cold fury on her sister's face. Hinata had never displayed any outward anger at anyone before, and to see such blatant fury on her normally passive sister's face was scary. Hanabi couldn't handle too many changes all at once, and she already had her fill during the afternoon session with her dad. She gulped and pacified herself under Hinata's heated gaze.

Hinata's voice, though calm and serene, held an undertone of a threat. "Hanabi, do not be so rude. You are a guest here so you must behave properly like one. Apologise immediately." She commanded with a steel tone and Hanabi quickly complied, murmuring a soft 'I'm sorry for my outburst', followed by a small bow towards Naruto, before sitting down tiredly from her eruption and Hinata's subsequent reprisal.

Naruto only gave the girl a gentle but slightly weary smile in return. "I'm not pitying you. I admit, I'm sympathetic to what has happened, but that's because I understand how it feels to be abandoned by people you trust." With these words, Hanabi looked back at Naruto with a new light in her eyes. Looking closely at his sky blue eyes with her own white, pupil-less ones, Hanabi was finally able to discover what she wanted to see. There was loss, a past pain quite easily detected from his eyes. This boy that stood before her had lost before, and he has somehow overcome that lost. From that moment on, Hanabi started to respect Naruto.

The rest of the night followed on nicely, with small talk and conversations stretching from subjects such as the change in weather, Konoha's reconstruction efforts, the people and friends they all knew, as well as various stories about the places that Naruto had travelled to during his short life time. Both Hanabi and Hinata had both been entranced by the story about his first C rank mission which turned into at least a B rank mission concerning the building of a great bridge in Wave Country. Naruto also gave them a brief description of the time he stayed in the Hidden Air Village, describing

it as a place of tranquil silence and natural beauty, touched and yet untouched by the hand of man. However, there was always a feeling of controlled atmosphere within the Hidden Air Village while the Hidden Leaf was freer.

However, soon, the conversation drifted onto dangerous grounds when Hanabi asked a seemingly innocent question. "Does the people of the Air hate the people of the Leaf? Do they really want all the Hyuuga's dead?" She asked quietly, curious and yet dreading the answer. Instantly, both Naruto and Hinata paled at the question - Naruto, because he really didn't know how to answer, and Hinata because she had suddenly been reminded of the situation at hand.

"Well. I... I can't really say because I don't know..." Naruto stumbled as he tried to explain.

Hinata's sad gaze fixed upon his eyes. "Please tell us the truth, Naruto-kun." She asked in a quiet voice.

Sighing in defeat, Naruto answered truthfully. "The Dokudes Clan is powerful and they hold their grudges close to their heart. They do hold an inherent hatred towards the Hyuuga, not just about the mistreatment of one of the their own, but also that the Hyuuga haven't ever taken the initiative to apologise, not even after all these years. The Dokudes Clan has always been prideful, and what the Hyuuga's did, damaged their pride. And that, in itself, is pretty much unforgivable. Unless the Hyuuga do something drastic as a sign of redemption, I can't see the Dokudes accepting anything less than the destruction of the clan." He told the two siblings gloomily.

"As for the other clans. The Kuunoki had always been a neutral ground unaffected and uninterested in the affairs of the other nations. I think they will continue to hold this stance, at least until the Hyuuga's do something else to piss off the Dokudes Clan, or even worse, the Uzumaki clan. What you have to understand is this, insult a normal clan – like the Dokudes, you will get some sort of reprisal. Insult a special clan – like the Uzumaki, and you get hell. The people of Kuunoki are very protective of their leading family, and if any

gesture is seen as a threat against the Uzumaki, they will attack, with or without orders."

"This is one of the reasons why the Dokudes haven't laid a hand on the Hyuuga yet, even after all these years - one, because my Aunt forbid them to, and two, because I was supposedly here. The Dokudes would not invade the Leaf as long as I stand by this village. They would not intone the wrath of the Uzumaki and that's probably all the defence the Leaf has at the moment."

"Is that why you're not taking any missions outside of the village at the moment?" Hinata asked curiously, as she had noticed that Naruto pretty much spent most of his time overseeing the reconstruction process of the village.

"Pretty much." He nodded in agreement. "As long as the 10 Gate Guardians are here, it is my job to oversee what they do and to keep the peace between them and the citizens of Konoha. So in a way, I'm working as a diplomat for now."

Silence hung in the air for a long time, while each of the three children thought about their own problems and how they plan to resolve them. Naruto nervously twitched as he thought about how he would pull a miracle in order to save the Hyuuga from the destruction. Hinata fell into depression again, the affects of the tea wearing off, as she remembered her father's words, as well as his frightening gaze. Hanabi slowly dozed off, the strain of the day wearing her thin.

Half an hour later, and coming to no conclusions, Naruto rubbed his forehead tiredly. */ How the hell did I get myself into these kinds of situations again?... /* He muttered mentally.

He glanced slightly at the slumped form of Hinata before him. The timid girl looked pale, and completely defeated. Mentally chiding himself for not noticing her predicament, he tried to make her feel better by giving her some encouraging words that everything would

be all right in the end. But Hinata didn't respond, she obviously didn't believe him. Naruto just didn't know what to do to comfort her.

It wasn't often that he finds himself in a situation where he has to comfort someone. On the contrary, Naruto isn't the type of person that would ever do that kind of stuff at all. He's just not good at it. Sighing again, Naruto tried to think of a different approach of argument to take Hinata's mind out of her depression.

"Technically speaking, what Hiashi is trying to do is simply illegal." He finally thought up a new argument to help reassure Hinata. "In the constitution of the Hyuuga Clan written many years ago, only a pure blood Hyuuga can become the leader of the Clan. And not only that, any change to the Hyuuga leader or to the constitution must be amended by a majority vote via the Hyuuga council. Since Hiashi had supposedly abolished the power structure of the Hyuuga Council, what he is doing is in effect – a dictatorship. You can be sure that both the Hokage and many of the higher ranked clans will not support this method of control. He simply cannot win."

He gave her a tense smile but Hinata's depressed expression never changed, she was still thinking over her family problems, not really paying any attention at all to her crush. Naruto sighed again. Turning his attention away from the depressed girl, he looked at the younger version of Hinata sleeping soundly on his new couch in the middle of the room. He had asked the rest of the Gate Guardians to leave the immediate premises for the time being, the only one left being Mishizu. It had been a long night for Naruto, worrying himself sick about what was going to happen to the Hyuuga Clan.

Through the use of the Yochigan, Naruto knew that the meeting between Hiashi and Jubei was inevitable. However, he had still hoped that it wouldn't cause such a fissure between the two families, clans and even villages. He had researched all available options to avoid such a catastrophe using the power of the Yochigan and had almost exhausted himself at the same time. Now that the event had finally occurred, he was at a loss for what to do. He could tell that the future is not as simple as a straight line from now on. There were

many variables to consider and many paths he could take. However, which path would lead to the least amount of conflict is what's troubling him.

No matter what choices he makes - people will suffer and people will get hurt. It is human nature for people to fear change, and this little episode will definitely lead to drastic changes, for both Hinata's sake and her father's. The question is *who* he was willing to sacrifice for the greater good of the Hyuuga Clan and the Hidden Leaf village.

From a justice point of view, the end that Hiashi is leading the Hyuuga Clan towards is justified. It would certainly purify the taint in the Leaf village's reputation as well as clear up the tension between the Leaf and the Air village. However, at the same time, the Hidden Leaf village depends on the Hyuuga Clan for its stability and wealth as well as the reputation of the Hyuuga's bloodline abilities. Without it, the Hidden Leaf village may suffer massive withdrawals of potential clients, leading to an economic meltdown. And not only that, other villages may see this as an opportunity to exploit, perhaps even leading into another inter-village war. And Konoha was in no state to prepare for war, especially since it has so recently survived an assault from Akatsuki.

Since the first day of his arrival, Naruto had known that the Hidden Leaf Village depended too much on the Hyuuga's influence and now look at the situation. He just wasn't sure whether it was salvageable anymore.

/ Oh well... I can't really do anything about it now, can I? I'll leave it for tomorrow... / Naruto thought to himself before deciding that it was time for bed.

"Come on, Hinata. I'm tired, you're tired and Hanabi's asleep already. Let's just all go to rest for the night, alright." Helping Hinata to her feet, he gestured for her to open the door to her new room. Standing up, he bent down to pick up the sleeping Hanabi delicately before following Hinata to their new room.

The room was spacious but at least had some more furniture. There were two futons already laid out on the floor next to each other. There was a dressing table to one corner and medium size cabinet for clothes in the other corner. The large window by the side of the wall was also given a good view overlooking the village.

Making sure that both Hinata and Hanabi were comfortable in their new beds, Naruto spoke a soft 'good night' before closing the door behind him and returning to his own room. Behind him, Mishizu made as little noise as possible, leaning against the adjacent wall, always a shadow keeping him safe.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx The next morning

"You sure you don't want to come?" Naruto asked tentatively again, just to make sure the two Hyuuga members knew that they were welcomed to join him in the upcoming discussion if they so wish. After all, it isn't every day they get a chance in having a say at what's going to happen to their original clan. But once again, Hinata simply shook her head gently in reply.

"O... Okay, you're both welcomed to stay as long as you like, feel free to wander around and stuff. I give you permission to do whatever you want. And to make sure that no one comes and bothers you, Seiko will be staying here as your bodyguard for the day. Take care of yourselves while I'm gone!" Naruto called out lastly as he left through the open doorway, unwilling to look back one more time just in case he changes his mind and drags the two unwilling girls to this special meeting. Behind him, Katana followed silently, eyes narrowed in irritation but silent with their own internal protests. Today, it was Katana's turn to attend to Naruto, while Seiko was specifically asked to guard the two Hyuuga siblings, leaving the rest of the Gate Guardians to do as they wish, as long as they don't cause any trouble.

It was the day after Hinata and Hanabi's impromptu residency within Naruto's small but sparsely decorated apartment and both had refused to accompany Naruto to the special council meeting held at

the Hokage's Tower. Due to the fact that the special meeting has to do with the future of the entire Hyuuga Clan as well as impacting on the welfare of Konoha itself, the Hokage had invited many previous council heads, clan heads, Jiraiya, as well as several high ranking Jounins and Anbu representatives. At the same time, Naruto was also invited as the sole representative for the Hidden Air Village, of which one of their members (excluding the deceased Hina) were directly involved in the entire Hyuuga matter.

Overall, it was a very delicate matter, and how it is resolved will have an impact not only on the Hyuuga clan itself, but also the future of Konoha and its relation to the Hidden Air village. Basically, everyone's been rather tense about this situation and all hopes that it would be resolved as soon as possible with the least amount of casualties.

Once Naruto has disappeared and the door firmly shut behind him, Hinata breathed a silent sigh of relief. It wasn't that she doesn't appreciate having Naruto's concern over her. On the contrary, she found it very sweet that he would worry about her of all people, but she just didn't want to hear him ask her about joining in on the meeting again. Frankly, she'd just rather not think about her old clan's predicament, nor does she want to be reminded of what her father was planning to do.

Last night's discussion hadn't really given her much hope that everything would eventually end up all right. She was a pessimist at heart, and here and now, she just didn't have the strength to think up any positive outcome that could be a result of this meeting. *'Have faith.'* Naruto-kun said. *But it's so hard. I'd rather not put my hopes up on to have it dashed later on.* / She thought firmly to herself.

Shaking these thoughts away, she looked around the vastly empty apartment looking for something to do in order to keep her mind away from all the bad thoughts. Seeing that the plants needed watering, Hinata walked into the kitchen. Opening each cupboard and cabinet drawer, Hinata slowly familiarised herself with the set up in Naruto's kitchen. Finding an empty container, she silently filled it

with water before walking back towards the two green leafy plants and went about watering them.

Continuing to busy herself, Hinata quietly took on the role of a maid or servant, cleaning the windows of every room except Naruto's. She then followed the task by washing up the dishes from breakfast, dusting away at the various furnitures, sweeping and then mopping the already clean wooden floors of the living room as well as the tiled area of the kitchen. Though Hinata had grown up as a noble in her family household, this does not mean that she had never learnt any skills in the department of cleaning. When she was still a young girl, she would often watch how the servants clean and tidy up the massive Hyuuga compound as a way to deter any boredom and or satisfy her curiosity. She would watch them inconspicuously as they cleaned the toilets and various rooms. Later, she would mimic the servant's movements and try out cleaning for herself, but only when she was alone and knew that no one was watching.

Silently glad that she had taken the time to memorise all the various cleaning utensils and techniques, Hinata quietly continued her work. Hours passed in silent action. Hinata was too busy cleaning to really think about anything in depth. Hanabi had taken this rare opportunity to sleep in until she feels ready to face the world again. And Seiko sat in a meditative stance in a corner of the living room, never getting in the way of Hinata's work but not comfortable enough to start a conversation with the half sister of her cousin.

Unbeknownst to Hinata, Seiko was actually watching the Hyuuga heiress's movements with an acute eye behind narrowed eyelids. Frankly, Hinata confused Seiko tremendously. From what Seiko knew about the Hyuuga Clan, most members were egotistical, arrogant and they all have an inane pride in their clan, which is one of the reasons why they often act superior to other people. However, Hinata doesn't match any of the above description. The girl was shy, tremendously so. And she doesn't act conceited at all. Perhaps it has to do with her being disowned by her own father and clan. But Seiko couldn't shake the suspicion that this was how Hinata had always

acted and behaved – that this was the girl's true nature. / *If this really is the true Hyuuga heiress... then what the hell am I and Jubei to do with her?* / Seiko questioned herself.

Even though Seiko is many years younger than her cousin, Jubei; as the heir to the head Dokudes family, it is Seiko's job to ensure future internal and external relationships regarding the clan as a whole – this includes any special grudges held by any particular member of the Dokudes clan. Seiko took this whole incident as a personal mission to either destroy the Hyuuga clan or to at least exact vengeance upon them. / *After all, justice must be served.* / She reminded herself as she continued to watch the tediously working Hyuuga.

It wasn't like her to let such an opportunity slip by. After all, it would be easy to hurt the heir of the Hyuuga who was so very vulnerable right in front of her. However, Seiko hesitated. Not just because Hinata posed absolutely no threat to her at all. Not just because the girl had been disowned by her own family and as such, was no longer a part of the Hyuuga Clan. But also because Seiko never really hated the girl; pitied her perhaps, but not hate. And there was simply no reason to take out her revenge on a weak-minded girl who had close to nothing to do with the past crime. As far as Seiko was concerned, Hinata is nothing more than an innocent bystander who just happened to be her cousin's half sister and the daughter of 'that' man.

Time passed slowly for the three people currently staying at Naruto's apartment. Eventually, Hinata ran out of things to clean completely. And when Hanabi had finally decided to get out of bed, Hinata had made her an impromptu brunch before the two sisters sat awkwardly in the middle of the couch in the living, eyeing things all around them in order to find something to do.

Focussing her eye sight on the small shelves of books and scrolls, Hinata wondered if Naruto would mind if she had a look through some of the books in order to get her mind off wandering too deeply.

/ Well, he did say treat this house like your home. / Her conscious did murmur in her head. Looking hesitantly at Seiko's meditative face, Hinata coughed to get her attention. "Ano... Seiko-san... Um... Do you think... I could... Um borrow some of Naruto-kun's books to read... I'm kinda... bored." She flushed in embarrassment as she admitted the last bit.

Seiko opened her eyes and looked at Hinata, piercing the Hyuuga in order to see her true intention. When all she got was the fact that Hinata was rather nervous and bored, Seiko obliged to the other girl's request. "It's fine." Seiko silently settled back to meditate, ignoring the rest of what Hinata and Hanabi intended to do.

Shuffling towards the shelves full of books and scroll, Hinata quietly looked over the covers and title names of the items held in the small collection. What she found surprised her. */ A collection of World Ninja History. Records of the Hidden Air Village. Scientific records of healing herbs Vs Medical Ninjutsu. Myths and Legends of the Demon Age (3). Wow. Naruto-kun has a wide range of reading materials, some of which I could never find, even in the Konoha Library! /* Interest peaked, Hinata took the one of the larger books – Scientific records of healing herbs Vs Medical Ninjutsu – flipping to the first page and immediately started reading.

Bored of sitting on the couch all-alone, Hanabi followed her sister's example and also randomly took a book, this time, she managed to grab the book – A collection of World Ninja History. The two sisters spend the next few hours completely engrossed in the books they're reading, Hinata leaning against the curtained wall and using the sunlight from the window, and Hanabi lying flat on the floor reading to her heart's delight.

The two girls were so engrossed in their books that they both missed lunch and eventually fell into a comfortable sleep by mid afternoon. Looking over at the two girl's prone form, Seiko couldn't bring herself to hate them, or even feel annoyed at them. */ Yes, they were innocent. Perhaps it's time for me and Jubei to rethink our strategies. Perhaps it isn't right for us to lump everyone into our schemes for*

revenge. / She thought to herself as she dragged some blankets and pillows from Hinata and Hanabi's new room, in order to cover the two sisters comfortably. After that, Seiko left the apartment in order to find some food. She knew that when the two girls finally woke up, both would be hungry.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx Naruto at the meeting

The council meeting was held at the Hokage's tower, all the previous council heads, clan heads, the Hokage herself and Jiraiya were present, as well as several high ranking Jounins and Anbu – including Kakashi and Gai. This was a special meeting held by the Hokage specifically to discuss the issue of the uprising happening within the Hyuuga Clan.

As for Naruto, for the first time in months, he could be rid of ALL the Gate guardians acting as his shadow protectors. He had somehow managed to convince them to leave him alone as this discussion directly influences the lives of at least three of the members of the Gate Guardians. As such, they must accept their place as a 'conflict of interest' (1) and voluntarily abstain from the discussion completely. And even though technically speaking, Naruto himself is considered having some 'conflict of interest', he was still accepted and his presence was even personally requested by Tsunade to attend the meeting. However, the ones that should have been there but weren't invited include Hinata and Hanabi. Naruto felt disgust that Hiashi would leave his two daughters out in the wilderness like that, as if they really weren't worth anything to begin with. But he kept his opinions to himself.

"Looks like I'm turning more and more like Aunt Ruri. Heh. I'm even starting to manipulate people like her..." Naruto sighed wearily, tired beyond belief. "When will this end..." He continued muttering as he watched the continued arguments fly around the room leading to absolutely nowhere.

"ENOUGH!" Tsunade's voice rang through the room, the fist slamming onto her once pristine table, splintering it in a second.

Huffing and puffing in aggravation, Tsunade finally calmed herself as all the attention of the members in the room turned to her. "Now that everyone is settled once again, let's go back to our initial discussion. Shikamaru! Please give a brief report as to what the fxxk has happened to the Hyuuga clan in the last three or so days!"

Sighing tiredly, Shikamaru slowly stood up from his seat. He REALLY hates his new position as the Hokage's primary advisor. How the hell did a Chuunin of his lowly calibre come to the position, he didn't know? All he knew was that it was a pain in the ass job and somehow he got saddled with it for an undetermined amount of time.

"Okay, here are the facts. Approximately three days ago, there was a confrontation between Hyuuga Hiashi, head of the Hyuuga Clan; and a representative from the Kuunoki 12 Gate Guardians – namely, a certain Dokudes Jubei. After the confrontation, it was revealed that this Dokudes Jubei was the illegitimate heir to the main Hyuuga House some 15 or 16 years ago. It was also revealed by Hyuuga Hiashi-sama that... at the time, the Hyuuga Council, currently consisting of 8 members – Hyuuga Hito, Hyuuga Haizo, Hyuuga Shun, Hyuuga Kenichi, Hyuuga Hibiki, Hyuuga Kaito, Hyuuga Yukimura, and Hyuuga Homura; undertook a daring conspiracy to ensure the murder of Dokudes Hina – a Peace and Trade representative from the Hidden Air village as well as her unborn child, the recently recognised Dokudes Jubei. During the reign of the Yondaime Hokage, the Hyuuga council specifically kept this coup de tat a secret from the Hokage, and consistently lied to him about their own involvement in the entire scandal." Pausing to take a short sip of water, Shikamaru glared balefully at the rest of the members in the room before continuing on with the story.

"Now. All that was in the past. During the last three days, the following is what has happened. Following the public acknowledgement of Jubei as Hyuuga Hiashi's eldest son and true heir to the Hyuuga clan, Hiashi-sama called forth a vote of no confidence in the rule of the eight Hyuuga Councillors. There was a referendum held in the Hyuuga house with a majority of Hyuuga

members voted to oust the Councillors and deprive them of their power. As a result of the stripping of power from the council, Hyuuga Hiashi-sama has become the sole leader and power broker in the Hyuuga estate. He has also called for the entire Hyuuga clan to accept Dokudes Jubei as the true heir to the Hyuuga clan, displacing the current heir – Hyuuga Hinata and secondary heir – Hyuuga Hanabi – both of whom are currently NOT present in this meeting." Pausing again for affect, Shikamaru concluded the rest of his speech. "Since then, several riots had erupted either within the Hyuuga compound or outside in the streets. Protestors against the abrupt sacking and discharge of the Hyuuga elder council has caused a huge imbalance in power and thrown the entire system into chaos. Due to the severe upheaval faced by the Hyuuga Clan, the Hokage has called forth an emergency meeting for all Clan heads, high ranked officials and Konoha councillors to sit in this meeting to discuss what can be done in order to sort out this mess." Shikamaru ended with a huff before sitting back down, ignoring the indignant look the female Hokage was throwing his way.

"Thank you Shikamaru-kun." Tsunade spat out through gritted teeth. She really didn't need him or all people to throw in a bit of sarcasm at the end of his talk. It was completely unnecessary and it only brought her more headaches. "As Shikamaru-kun has said. This emergency meeting is to discuss a resolution to the power struggle and sudden turmoil in the (arguable) most powerful clan in Konoha. The Hyuuga Clan has always been an important part of Konoha culture. As such, any disturbance in the Hyuuga Hierarchy would definitely affect the rest of the Hidden Leaf Village as a whole. I ask that you all think about the consequences to the Village, instead of just the impending impacts on said clan alone. We are in difficult times and the last thing we need is political in-fighting." Tsunade concluded strongly, glaring almost threateningly at the rest of the people present. "Now, let the meeting commence."

Before an eruption of arguments could even begin, Naruto decided to speak up and add his own two cents into the discussion. "Though some of you may consider this a Hyuuga internal dispute." Here, he

glared quite menacingly at Hiashi specifically. "It is undoubtedly the single most important issue that will not only impact on the internal relations within Konoha, but also the relationship with the Hidden Air Village. May I remind you all that we are still alive today BECAUSE of the involvement of the 12 Gate Guardians, who have spent the last 3 months helping us rebuild the village for no public acknowledgement or payment." Pausing in dramatic effect, Naruto brought forth a very interesting point of view. Since he is essentially the only representative of the 12 Gate Guardians, he thought it would be good for the rest of the old fools to hear their side of the story as well. At least now, the discussion won't be completely focused on Konoha alone, they will have to keep in mind the consequences in dealing with other villages as well, especially the rather shaky ground with the Kuunoki.

However, Naruto still had another point to add. So instead of waiting for the rest of the group to swallow the previous information, he bulldozed onward with another point of debate. "I also might remind you that under the law of Konoha's internal charter on such clan's power structure in relation to the village, as well as written in black and white within the Hyuuga's own Clan Constitution – it is ILLEGAL to oust the entire Hyuuga council of 8, just by the vote of one person. Only the Hokage has such a power, and obviously, Tsunade-sama had nothing to do with this dispute. So I ask you all, is it even relevant that we hold this meeting? Does Hiashi-sama even have the authority to do to the Hyuuga Clan what should have been impossible in the first place? After all, it was the fear of these types of political in-fighting that created the system of the Main house and Branch house structure in the first place."

"Third and my final point! Dokudes Jubei is a half-breed. Can the Hyuuga clan actually accept a half-breed Hyuuga male heir in comparison the two full-blood female heiresses, whom have both been groomed for the position since their birth? Even if the clan accepts, will Jubei accept the decision? Have any of you even ASKED?" Naruto demanded, his eyes never leaving the stoic face of

Hyuuga Hiashi, his tone of voice almost accusing in its undertones. The room stayed silent after Naruto's slight outburst.

/ Of course none of them have even thought about other people's opinions and stances. They're all too self-absorbed and narrow-minded to keep an eye on the big picture. Sometimes I wonder how they even come to their current positions. You people have to think STRATEGIC!(2) Not short-term! / Naruto mentally grumbled to himself.

"So the question now is this. What are our priorities? What should we work towards? What do we really want in the end?" Jiraiya finally spoke up, for the first time since the start of the session. And he nailed the bull right in its eye with his word's precise accuracy. What is it exactly that people want to work out of this dispute. Everyone knew what the problems were, but they need to know the particular results they wanted first before they can even think about what processes they should take in order to achieve it.

xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx xxx XXX xxx Some time later

For the next five hours, the discussions in the meeting rose and fell like the waves of the ocean. Sometimes, a tidal wave of arguments and verbal fights would erupt only to be silenced by flying furniture of some sort thrown by none other than a very frustrated lady Hokage. Other times, the entire room would be as silent as the night with no one having any new idea or point to put forward. Through out the intense five-hour meeting, Tsunade had already called for three different breaks, all in order for the attendants to get their heads screwed back on properly after many intense discussions. But finally, a semblance of a decision has been made and an action plan in its initial stages prepared.

Drawing on a large blackboard, Naruto finalised the decision made during the five-hour discussion into a simple diagram so that everyone knows what have been decision and agree with the consequences of the decision. "Okay, by law of the constitution, the governing body of the Hyuuga Clan is made up of ONE

representative – that is, the Clan leader, and a council or committee made of up eight respective Hyuuga Clan members. At the start of the meeting, we all decided that one of the outcomes we want to achieve is the reconciliation between the Main House members with the Branch House members of the Hyuuga Clan. As such, we all agreed that the ruling committee would be made up of FOUR members from the Main House and FOUR other members from the Branch house, to symbolise equality and give a balance of power. Reconciliation WILL occur slowly and in a progressive manner. There's just too much hate, anger and inbred distrust between the two groups that trying to squash them all into one group under one banner would just be asking for trouble."

"To ensure that the committee will NOT abuse their power as we have seen in the example of the ex-current council members. We, the council of the entire Hidden Leaf Village have come up with a four-year rotation program. Basically, each member of the Hyuuga council is VOTED into the position by majority vote in and among Hyuuga members, and they can only rule for a term of four years. There will be NO consecutive ruling, however, they are allowed to take a four-year break after their term, and maybe try again to be voted into the position at a later date. For each year, there can only be two members of the council end their term – this is to ensure that we don't get a situation where every single council member is voted in and have no experience in governing the clan. This also means that there will be an election to vote in the two outgoing members every single year. Again, to be fair, each time, there will only be ONE member from the Main house and ONE member from the Branch house ending their term each time." Listing out all the rules, half the board was filled out with the intricacies of the new four-year program, all in an effort to ensure complete fairness that will hopefully lead to the future prosperity of the Hyuuga Clan.

"Now that we have finished deciding on what we want done with the Council system, there is still the single representative position of Clan leader we have to discuss. Some of us..." Here, Naruto gave a direct glare at Hyuuga Hiashi and his entourage. "Wants the system

to stay as is, so as not to confuse the people within the Hyuuga Clan. Others..." Here, Naruto shifted his looks to the lady Hokage and Jiraiya respectively. "Wanted to have the representative leader to also work on a rotational basis. This is where we stand! First we must decide what type of system we will use, whether we stay with the old system – meaning that only members of the head Hyuuga Family will become leaders, male children before female children; or create a fairer, more balanced system." Naruto shrugged in tired nonchalance. "After that, we will also have to continue our debates on who should become the next Hyuuga heir depending on the system we finalise."

By the time Naruto finally returned home with Katana by his side, both Hinata and Hanabi had gone to bed as it was close to midnight. Naruto sighed tiredly as he saw the covered dinner that still sat quietly on the kitchen table. He also noticed Seiko standing beside the closed curtains of the main living room window, still awake. "So, how was their day?" He asked nonchalantly, shrugging off his jacket and just dumping it unceremoniously onto the couch.

Seiko shrugged in response. "Nothing eventful happened. Hinata spent most of the morning cleaning while Hanabi slept. Afterwards, they both spent the rest of the day reading the books you placed on the shelves. I gave them permission as I didn't think you'd mind." She replied succinctly with a half bow.

Naruto nodded, acknowledging that she did the right thing. Sighing again, Naruto rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "Okay, let's all get some rest, Hikari and Koushiro will be taking over tomorrow right?" He asked, directing his question at Katana, who only nodded in silence. Accepting it as the end of conversation, Naruto moved sluggishly to his room, leaving it slightly open for Katana to slip inside and close the door after him. Seiko remained outside, continually watchful of anything and everything that may or may not happen. 24 hour shifts where how the Kuunoki Shinobis operate. If one the guardians were given a mission to watch over Naruto for a day, it literary translates

to a full day – that includes all 24 hours without sleep. But as a Dokudes, sleep was a necessary evil that can be placed aside for more important things anytime. Seiko sighed, she'll have to remember to relate everything she learnt about the two Hyuuga girls to Jubei the next time she saw him. The elder Dokudes had been keeping himself scarce ever since the initial disastrous meeting between himself and Hyuuga Hiashi. This was due to several reasons: 1) because Naruto had forbidden him to even step foot into Konoha until the entire incident is resolved and 2) Seiko was positive that the initial meeting between himself and his wayward father had affected the boy more so than he showed. After all, he had not expected the sudden accepting nature of Hiashi. Everything was just moving too fast and out of their control, which wasn't what Seiko wanted in the first place at all.

(To be continued.)

(1) For those of you who don't know what this term means, it's (I believe) a business terminology / political debate terminology. Basically, when someone has an interest in a particular decision being made – as in they can get something out of this decision going their way; they are usually removed from the decision making process all together – as in, they cannot vote. In the Business sense, if a businessman could and would earn more money for himself if the company's executive committee decide to pursue something, then this particular businessman must (in all conscious) declare a 'conflict of interest' and be removed from the room when the rest of the committee finally make a decision on the issue at hand. I hope that make sense. I'm slowly but surely incorporating governmental terminology and business terminology into the story and plot because I think politics is a really important aspect of life. Politics is basically rules made by man to control man, and yet it is influence by emotions and illogical reasons. We are governed by it essentially and as such, it is very important in our lives. It's not just about conspiracy, clashes in personality or power struggles but the intricacies of the process of politics – I think – is fascinating. Try

reading some of your countries' own national constitutions, it really shows you a lot about how man views himself.

(2) "Strategic" – another term I stole from the political and business terminology (not defence or anything of that sort). The word 'Strategic' in this circumstance have connotation with long-term, a sort of future-goal that people should work towards. But unlike 'missions' or 'visions', it is specific and it is very achievable if you just set out step-by-step processes to achieve your goal.

(3) Just to clarify, these books were brought over by Jubei and the rest of the Gate Guardians. Most of Naruto's belongings had been trashed during the short war between the Hidden Leaf and the Hidden Sound village. Other than Naruto's most precious items (Elle's flower, his father's scroll and his mother's special gift), everything else had not been salvageable during the aftermath. And whatever furniture had been intact enough to be used had been donated away, leaving Naruto with very little of his original belongings.

Once again, very short chapter. The shortest in the entire series I'll bet. I'm sorry for the long wait, but I've not inspiration about how to get myself out of this situation. If anyone has any ideas on the plot, suggestions or even ideas for jutsu, I would love to hear from you. Sometimes, you guys can guide my story writing with a really good review. I sincerely thank you all for your support since the very beginning. I know I'm slowing down but with your continual support, I swear I will finish this story one day, if only to repay all your gracious kindness. Thanks and please remember to review.

Next chapter summary: The new Hyuuga council decides what to do with the traitorous previous council heads, and Jubei reappears.

Resolution II

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty: Resolution II

"Demon's talk" , */Thoughts/* , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: Another slow but action-less chapter. However, I can promise that the plot will be moving along at a steady pace. Again, OOCness for some canon characters (Hiashi, Hinata and Hanabi especially) and we gain more of an insight into the personality of Jubei.

Sorry for the long wait. I had finished the chapter some weeks ago but none of my poor betas were free enough to help me edit it. In fact, it still hasn't been edited (not even once) so expect many errors. Other than that, is anyone interested in taking on irregular beta-ing whenever I need them. This will only occur when my regular betas are really busy with exams and stuff. So if some of you are interested, please give me an email (email's on my profile's page). Anyway, hope you enjoy the chapter.

Chapter 20

A week has passed since the initial discussion held between the Hokage, the various clan heads, the council and several important members of the Konoha public (Naruto included). And things have

been progressing at a steady pace, under the watchful eye of Naruto, Tsunade and Jiraiya, who were the heavy pushers placing large amounts of pressure on the Hyuuga Clan to act as fast and as efficient as possible. Both the main and branch Hyuuga Clan members have reconciled somewhat and officially accepted the newly established rotational system to be implemented within their own internal council, in order to ensure that the councillors never abuse their power again.

However, no headway has been made in regard to the unbalance of power held by the single Hyuuga Clan leader itself. The people all opposed the initial idea of using a similar rotational system to select the Hyuuga Clan leader, simply because it would be too much of a difference compared to the old system. And as any human nature dictates, people fear change, because they may not always understand what the results are of such drastic change.

The members of the Hyuuga Clan have always trusted that the head family within the clan would always put the clan before all else and as such, were almost fanatical in their dedication and loyalty to Hiashi. Even Naruto was hard press to bring about any doubt within the minds of the Hyuuga Clan members and he has been gaining a reputation for himself as a trustful prophet. Overall, though there was progress, it wasn't going too much in Naruto's favour. However, nor was the situation completely against his original intention either.

Naruto understood that 'control' has always been a major issue within the Hyuuga Clan, as demonstrated by the use of the curse seal to control the lives of branch members. But with the changing system within the clan, the Hyuuga members have become confused and feel as if they are losing control of their own clan. That is something unacceptable. Each and every member understand that change is inevitable and accepts that the Hokage only has the clan's own survival in mind, but to disregard their traditions and the customary power held by the main head family is too drastic a change for them to immediately accept. As such, Hiashi still retains all the power he had always held, and with the council so new and

inexperienced, Naruto is starting to wonder if he hadn't unexpectedly helped Hiashi in his plan to completely annihilate the Hyuuga Clan.

However, not everything was bleak, Naruto had hope that the new rotational system will somehow balance out the power held in Hiashi's hand, if not immediately, then definitely in the future.

/ Still, the situation was out of my hands, so there really was nothing I could do to touch Hiashi, no matter how much that man deserved it.
/ Naruto thought to himself as he opened the door to his apartment.

For the last week, Hinata and Hanabi had been living with Naruto and the rest of the Gate Guardians. Although the Hokage had organised a hostel for all ten members of the Gate Guardian located right next to Naruto's new apartment, everyday, it is still the duty of at least one of the Gate guards to act as Naruto's personal bodyguard, protecting him from anything they perceive as a threat. This task has been compounded with the addition of Hinata and Hanabi. Now, instead of just one Gate Guardian following Naruto around, he has at least two or sometimes three Gate Guardians following himself, Hinata and Hanabi around the village, protecting them from any deemed threat.

However, for the last week, Jubei has made himself scares. Although Naruto had previously ordered him to stay outside of the village, by now, he believed that Jubei had secretly left the leaf village in order to report back to his Aunt and Kaga-san on the progress of the village. Knowing his aunt, Ruri would want to know every detail that she hadn't already predicted during her constant visions.

Sometimes, Naruto really hated being a Uzumaki. No, that wasn't right; he hated receiving random visions whenever and wherever they feel like coming along. Unlike the Yochigan technique where he had to physically force his bloodline ability to follow his commands, nowadays he had been receiving a large number of visions that come during random times of the day, completely distracting him from whatever he was doing, and it was a constant struggle to keep his Shinobi senses sharp. */ I guess that's one of the reasons why*

Aunt Ruri sent the Gate guardians after me, she knew that I would probably need extra protection. Not that I really need it or anything; I could always use clones. But I won't look a gift horse in the mouth. I Naruto concluded in his mind.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Naruto's wandering mind was interrupted by a cheerful voice welcoming him home.

"Welcome back, Naruto-kun. How was today?" Hinata had made much headway in gaining confidence and self-assurance in the past week. Naruto wasn't sure what exactly had managed to change the once pathetically shy Hyuuga but none-the-less, he was happy with her progress. Her stance was relaxed, her eyes bright and confident, a gentle smile often fixed on her face, overall, Hinata had changed a lot in the last few days.

Perhaps it had to do with her unexpected companionship with Maya. The two quiet girls (Maya and Hinata) had somehow hit it off the very first time they met during Hinata's stay at Naruto's apartment. Both had been shy and quiet with very little confidence – Hinata due to her inherent personality and constant belittlement under her father's influence, and Maya because of the overwhelming amount of staring people had been giving her since the moment she left the Kuunoki. Both girls had instantly become friends, even managing to start a conversation that lasted close to the entire day (from what Naruto could tell). The two girls found in each other a kindred spirit. And by sharing their experiences, hopes and fears, both were able to slowly encourage each other into believing in oneself. The change was gradual, but the improvement was as blatant as the sun's rays of light. Each time the two girls met, they practiced with each other on how to converse properly without stuttering, blushing, always fearing what others thought of them. The two girls had really helped each other a lot during their unorthodox therapy sessions.

At the same time, Hanabi had also found some playmates within Tori, Katana and Seiko. Tori's childish behaviour never ceased to amuse Hanabi. Due to her noble and often stringent background at the Hyuuga compound, Hanabi had never been exposed to the

natural, playful behaviours of normal children, not that Tori was ever normal of course - he wouldn't have been able to become one of the Gate Guardians at such a young age if he was normal to begin with.

Katana had somehow managed to win over Hanabi's respect and soon the younger girl had started idolising him (to poor Katana's disgust). It wasn't everyday that Hanabi had been able to meet a person almost her age, and yet so much more powerful than her. She respected him for his strength, but more than that, she's value him for his no nonsense attitude and haughty behaviour. He was similar to her father in personality but he never treated the younger girl with anything less than the utmost respect, and because of that, Hanabi values him as a good friend and confidant – something familiar and yet a new experience.

Unbeknownst to Katana, Naruto suspects that Hanabi might even be developing a small crush on the short, brown haired boy. But Naruto would never dare to intervene with such a blooming relationship, and neither did he have any wish to be chopped to pieces by Katana once the boy finds out.

Seiko had been rather distant in behaviour to the two girls at first. Naruto accepted this as natural considering Seiko's standing as the current heir to the Dokudes Clan, but even he was surprised that by the end of the week, Seiko had befriended both Hyuuga heirs. The three girls together weren't that close in their friendship to warrant hugs or gossip or anything of that matter, but they were comfortable in each other's presence and that was more than anything Naruto had expected.

Unknown to him, this development between the Hyuuga girls and Seiko had occurred when he was away at another meeting to discuss future plans for Konoha. It was actually Hinata who found the courage to approach Seiko in the first place in order to initiate a conversation between the three girls.

(FLASHBACK)

"Ano... Seiko-san. You're... You're a member... of the Dokudes Clan, right?" Hinata asked hesitatingly.

"Ah." Seiko acknowledged.

"Um... Do..." Hinata gulped but drew on all her courage. "Do you hate us? I mean, Hanabi and myself?" Fiddling her thumbs together, Hinata lowered her head even more, amusing herself with looking at the wooden floor beneath her. Even Hanabi had become interested in the conversation and had started looking between her sister and the strange girl from the corner of her eyes.

"No. Not really." Seiko answered abruptly.

"WHAT? But I thought... I thought that you hate... um... all of us?" Hinata tilted her head cutely, completely confused by Seiko's answer.

"Hmpt." Seiko snorted in disgust before turning away, ignoring Hinata's concentrated gaze and Hanabi's wayward one drilling into the back of her head.

After a few minutes of complete silence, Seiko finally gathered her thoughts enough to answer back. "It isn't that I hate each individual of the clan specifically, I don't even know any of you or what your stories are. And frankly, I'm not interested. What I do hate is how the Hyuuga Clan, AS A CLAN, didn't even acknowledge their crimes and therefore hadn't made any ATTEMPT at reconciliation with my clan." Seiko replied haughtily.

"One of OUR members were betrayed, abused, and almost killed. We want compensation, we want revenge, but most of all, we want JUSTICE. My aunt deserved to die a honourable death, instead of the slow, painful depression that drew away her life. Jubei deserved a family, a proper name and standing, either within the Hyuuga Clan or the Dokudes clan. Instead, he's seen as illegitimate by you Hyuugas and as an outcast by the Dokudes. He has a lot of hate and anger hiding behind his constant smiles, and once that anger finds a

target – namely YOUR FATHER and YOUR CLAN – let me say I wish you the best of luck, IF you survive his wrath." Seiko spoke passionately about justice, a subject in which she was very vehement about.

" He's an outcast? WHY?" Hinata was shocked that her half brother's situation. From his words and actions, Hinata had assumed that Jubei had the full support of the Dokudes clan and as such, was heavily included in clan business, which was one of the reason (Hinata thought) that he was so angry with the Hyuuga clan.

" Because he was born with your Byakugan eyes. That has never occurred in the history of the Dokudes family. All of our eyes are a variety of purple or violets, no matter how much our blood has been degraded. He's seen as a freak of nature by some of the more traditional members of the Dokudes clan due to this severe difference. Not only that, instead of being trained by the clan itself; Jubei was taken in by Yuuki-hime, and then once Yuuki-hime left the village, he was later transferred to become the first apprentice of Kaga-san. The thing is, Jubei is powerful – sometimes too powerful, even in the eyes of the traditional Dokudes clan members. They fear him and his eyes, so they push him away from 'family' business as much as possible. Truthfully, Jubei doesn't have a proper family to belong to other than the Uzumaki family." Seiko explained systematically with a cold tone of voice.

Small amounts of tears appeared by the sides of Hinata's eyes as she thought about her half-brother's plight. It never occurred to her that other than herself, someone else (of the same Hyuuga Main Branch) was suffering because of the actions of her father. She had known that the Branch family members had held a grudge against the Main family for many years due to the blatant favouring of one side of the clan over the other. And she had always hated the entire system. She had often idolised the idea that if she was born outside of the clan, life would be much better.

But here was her proof. Her naivety about the world was crushed with the knowledge that without her clan, she was nothing but a

worthless, practically nameless girl. Without the backing of the powerful Hyuuga name, what was she but a miniscule being in the face of the world. Her brother had no support, from the sound of Seiko – he had always had to rely on himself. Hinata pitied him, and she sympathised, but at the same time, she also envied him. Jubei had been strong, he had been able to carve a place for himself in the face of the world. He was now somebody – a Gate guardian; not just that, he was the leader of the Gate Guardians – a position that represented the strongest of the Hidden Air village. He had proved his existence and had gained acknowledgement. What had she done? Nothing of significance.

All this talking had brought Hinata back to her original depressed state. Thinking about how her father had always belittled her and how the rest of the clan looked down on her. Now that she was free of the pressure, she felt so alone and she was scared. She wasn't use to such a lonely existence and she also had to take care of Hanabi. The responsibility frightened her. However, before Hinata could continue her spiralling thoughts, she was interrupted by Seiko once again.

" Back to the original topic, no, I do not hate you, I just want some justice done in honour of my aunt's suffering. As for Jubei, I think he wants revenge and maybe some acknowledgement. He was the one most hurt by your father's betrayal and my aunt's death. That, compounded by the fact that Naruto-sama seems to be pretty protective of the Hyuuga clan, must be driving him insane with frustration. Jubei may not show it, but sometimes he's scary when he's angry." Seiko muttered to herself, unknowing voicing a thought that had always haunted her when she was young.

It was true, due to his lack of parental figures and family support; Jubei held a lot of anger both towards the Dokudes clan and the Hyuuga. Sometimes, when he allows the world to see a small part of that anger hidden away deep in his heart, it was definitely a scary sight.

(END FLASHBACK)

After that almost random conversation, an understanding grew between Hinata and Seiko. And soon, Hanabi too joined the group and the three girls formed a tentative friendship that grew and grew with each passing day. Due to the fact that both the Hyuuga heirs often stayed indoors instead of going out and risk facing other members of the Hyuuga Clan, all the Gate Guardians responsible for guarding them for the day had to stay with them in doors. And with nothing to do all day, people talked or played games and they grew closer with time.

Hinata no longer feared any of the Gate Guardian members, the only exception being her brother whom she hadn't seen at all. Tori and Akiko was fun to be around, the two childish, outgoing personalities always brought a smile to her face. Maya had been a godsend to Hinata as she finally found someone whom she could relate with almost completely. Yami (the only other Dokudes Clan related member) was always very quiet, but give him a bowl of food and he too, would soon relax into a natural posture. Hikari and Koushiro together were very funny to watch. It was always entertaining to watch the heated sibling rivalry between the two Raitei siblings. Katana had a short temper but most days he remains bored and were often easy to convince to participate in any organised game or action between and among the Hyuuga sisters. Of course, with Hanabi's developing crush on the boy, Hinata was spending more and more time with the social recluse boy who seemed to be always sensitive about his height. And lastly, Seiko had become less of a distant bodyguard, and more of a friend.

Out of all the Gate guardians however, Hinata still wished to get to know her brother the most. By the end of the week, she had come to an understanding about Jubei (mostly due to Seiko's confession). She wanted to get to know him. She wanted to be the family that he's always searched for but never attained. She too was lonely and if she was lonely, she knew that he would be too. He was her brother – even though he was only a half brother, but none the less, to Hinata, family was family, and family should always stick together no matter what.

So it was no surprise to Hanabi and Seiko when one day, Hinata finally found the courage to approach Naruto with a request.

"Excuse me? Can you repeat that?" Naruto exclaimed with a shocked expression on his face. "I don't think I heard you properly."

Drawing in a deep breath, Hinata voiced her request a second time, furiously trying not to blush in front of her crush, knowing that his eyes were completely focused on watching her every move. "I'd like to get to know Jubei-niisan. Can you please order him back to Konoha so that we can officially meet and talk... maybe over tea or something." She answered tentatively, losing some of her confidence.

Naruto felt his jaw drop and his mind spun with possibilities of terrible scenarios running rampant through his mind. Things could turn very bad during this forced confrontation and he really wanted to avoid that. "Are you sure?" Naruto somehow managed to choke out after a long drawn out silence.

Hinata nodded her head resolutely.

Seeing the determination in Hinata's white eyes, possibly for the first time, Naruto finally sighed in exhaustion. "O... Okay. I'll see what I can do." Pausing a bit to gather his thoughts, Naruto then made a hasty addition to his original acceptance. "But, he won't be back for a while. I think he might still need some time to cool off. So, when he does get back, I'll ask him to talk to you as soon as possible. Is that alright?"

However, his gloomy disposition was immediately whisked away at the bright expression on Hinata's face as a result of his agreement. The pure euphoria and gratitude showing in her eyes pushed away any self doubt that Naruto previously had, leaving him feeling only a sense of pride and the thoughts of always keeping that smile on her face for as long as he lived. */ She's beautiful when she smiles like that. /* Naruto unconsciously thought to himself as he reaffirmed his

own mental promise from now on. / I'll always do my best to keep her happy, if only to see that smile constantly on her pretty face. /

Naruto never noticed how deep his thoughts had revolved around the happiness of this single Hyuuga representative during the past weeks. He didn't even acknowledge the fact that he had slowly become very protective of the two girls. However, his behaviour towards Hinata had changed, slowly but surely, his affections for the quiet girl had evolved, but to what, no one was sure. He never noticed, and therefore was not aware that his behaviour was no longer that of just a close friend. (1)

Another day, another meeting... Naruto was getting VERY sick of all these discussions. True, progress is being made, especially with regard to the rise in employment and revenue from ninja missions; the reconstruction of Konoha was almost a hundred percent complete and the hottest topic in discussion currently was still the Hyuuga situation, though it was no longer as volatile as before.

The rotational system of the new Hyuuga Council had been successfully established, and a team of eight completely new councillors had been voted in. Naruto was slightly surprised at the efficiency of the whole plan until he realised that the Hyuuga clan members also want stability as soon as humanly possible, and are doing their very best to facilitate successful and efficient progress of implementation. With the new council in place, Naruto can finally breathe in a sigh of relief at not having to worry about the amount of power still being held by Hiashi.

True, immediately after the formation of the new Council eight, Hiashi had wanted to bring forth the issue of clan heir as he thought it was the most important topic of discussion. However, though new and inexperienced, the councillors ruled against bringing forth this discussion so soon with very logical reasons supporting them. One, whomever they choose to be the next clan heir is still young and therefore they still have time to grow and prove their strength of

character and physical abilities. Everyone understands that the decision on clan heir should not be a hasty decision to make. Two, the new councillors believe that they should be dealing with the current situation on hand before managing any future risks (as that is how they classified the issue of clan heir) – basically, all eight members believe dealing with the surviving ex-councillors was far more important to the status of the Hyuuga Clan, Konoha's future as well as furthering relations with the Kuunoki.

Being unable to weasel his way out of the argument, Hiashi had settled to agree with the new council, after all, it's back to eight versus one, Hiashi can't win unless he had a majority consensus with any decision. He further agreed that the decision on clan heir could be postponed to a later date, as long as the issue is kept permanently on the agenda until officially resolved.

Within a few days of internal debate between the new councillors and Hiashi, they all came to a unanimous decision on how to deal with the ex-councillors for their crimes against the clan, Konoha as a whole as well as disrupting the relations between villages. There was a unanimous agreement to seal off each of the criminals' bloodline limit abilities, making them unable to use the Byakugan at all. This would be a symbol of their exile from the clan, which is then followed by being extradited to face any punishments organised by the Dokudes Clan and the rest of the Kuunoki village. A fitting end for those who had lied and abused their power to such an extent that it would ruin any future prosperities of the village that they had once sworn to protect with their lives. And most importantly, Naruto assured the new Hyuuga council that this would certainly satisfy the infuriated Dokudes clan.

In fact, Naruto was very satisfied with the outcome of the entire fiasco. Ever since the forming of the new Hyuuga council, Hiashi had taken a back seat of sorts, no longer taking everything into his own hands and manipulating the situation as he sees fit. Naruto really had nothing against the man specifically, but he did not like the implications of Hiashi's harsh actions against his own daughters and

fellow clan members. It was simply immoral to betray your own clan in pursuit of a selfish cause, even if that cause was to repent for past misdeed and hopefully earn the acknowledgement of a son he never saw or were responsible for. Overall, Naruto was very pleased with the entire situation.

A few days after the decision on how to progress with the punishment of the ex-council members, a public announcement was launched through out the whole of Konoha, calling for the public to participate and be witness to a history-writing event, the sentencing of the Hyuuga ex-councillors.

On the day of the sentencing, a large crowd had gathered at the Konoha stadium, the same stadium used for the Chuunin Exams, but this difference this time is that all eight criminals were displayed on the arena floor while their announcers were sitting next to the Hokage and other VIPs. And for the first time in weeks, Dokudes Jubei was present, sitting as the right hand man next to Naruto, acting as the representative of the Dokudes clan (with Seiko) as well as Naruto's personal bodyguard.

Soon, the progression went underway and everyone fell into silence, listening intently to what the representative of the new Hyuuga council is announcing.

"I hereby denounce the following people from the Hyuuga Clan: Hyuuga Hito, Hyuuga Haizo, Hyuuga Shun, Hyuuga Kenichi, Hyuuga Hibiki, Hyuuga Kaito, Hyuuga Yukimura, and Hyuuga Homura. You are all banished from the Hyuuga Clan. For your crimes, you will all be purged from the Hyuuga Clan. Each of you will receive the 'bird in a cage' curse seal upon your foreheads, locking away the power and secrets of the Byakugan for the rest of your lives. Not only that, but you all be subjected to the will of the Dokudes clan for the conspiracy and attempted murder of Dokudes Hina as well as her unborn son. What do you plead?" One of the new council representatives, a member of the Branch house spoke confidently and unassumingly to the eight criminals now kneeling before him. In

the public arena, this would be history in the making and as the spoken representative of the new council, he must keep a most neutral façade as possible.

"We do not plead." Old man, Hyuuga Haizo, as the unofficial leaders of the old regime of the Hyuuga council answered firmly, unafraid and undaunted by the prospect of being stripped of his in-born Byakugan ability as well as being subjected to the tender mercies of the Dokudes Clan. Even in exile or death, he had his pride, and that pride would never be stripped away from his being.

"So be it. I now announce your verdicts by the new Hyuuga Council. Hyuuga Haizo... guilty. Hyuuga Hito, guilty. Hyuuga Shun, guilty. Hyuuga Kenichi, guilty, Hyuuga Hibiki, guilty. Hyuuga Kaito, guilty. Hyuuga Yukimura, guilty; and Hyuuga Homura, guilty." The representative continued his speech unwaveringly, his tone of voice stable and never floundering, his grip on emotion extreme.

Soon, the procession of sealing each of the eight criminals' inherent bloodline ability began. It took much blood, much time and much misery for certain members of the Hyuuga to place these horrible seals upon their kin. But it must be done. Justice must be served. And once all the sealing were done and over with, the eight would face the wrath of one Dokudes Jubei before being transported to the Kuunoki village to face whatever punishments the rest of the Dokudes Clan and the 7 high councillors could come up with.

Standing on the far side of the ceremony stood Neji, his face completely blank of expression. No guilt, no regret, no enthusiasm. He did not regret seeing these old men and women of the main house suffer. They deserved it for all the abuse and subjugation that had been undertaken towards the branch house members. However, a part of him still felt sympathy towards the eight criminals. / *No matter what, we are all from the same family; these are my distant uncles and aunts, they are MY family. And I'm just standing here, watching them suffer.* / He thought to himself silently.

He gave an inaudible sigh of sadness. Though he understood why this was all happening and a part of him even approved of these actions, it none the less hurt him when he realised that he was no different than what he had been before, powerless. */ I wish... I hope one day... I would be able to control my own destiny... I hope I can become powerful enough, acknowledged enough, so that I can take my own destiny into my hands. /* Gazing sympathetically as the last of the eight were firmly sealed, Neji's eyes hardened in determination. */ No, I will never put myself in such a helpless situation. I will become strong, I will become important. I will never again let this clan, these people, or anyone in particular to have any control over my life. My life is my own and I make my own decisions. /* Neji thought determinately to himself.

Jubei stood proud and tall before the eight kneeling figures of the past Hyuuga Councillors, his expression calm and blank, showing no emotions. Behind him on his right stood the undaunted figures of Dokudes Seiko, while Shinzo Yami stood to his left. Together, they were the three sole descendants of the Dokudes clan currently present in Konoha, with Naruto himself also recognised of a distant relation to the clan.

"So, the day finally comes when you are to grovel before my feet." Jubei replied in a cool but uncaring voice. Certain members of the eight flinched under the gaze of cold fury behind Jubei's calculating, white eyes. Other tensed in anticipation while one – the eldest – the leader merely glared in prideful anger.

Slowly, a cruel smirk appeared on Jubei's once blank face. "I think I have the perfect punishment for you all. The black rings of Sin (Tsumi no Kuroiwa) will do nicely, I think." Gracefully, Jubei lifted his index finger and pointed it upwards towards the sky. One of the tiny gold rings upon his finger enlarged and started floating nonchalantly in mid air. By his summoning, the golden ring stopped enlarging itself once it has reached a certain size (about 20 centimetres in diameter) before rotating itself on its horizontal axis. Twirling once before

coming to a stop, something small and smooth abruptly fell out from the rotating ring's centre, as if the rotating ring had become some sort of portal or gateway in which things can be stored, put away or summoned forth easily. Upon Jubei's hand landed the small black scroll – of which was the item that original feel out from his rotating ring.

Returning his gold ring to the proper size and placement (on his finger), Jubei redirected his attention to the small black scroll upon his right palm. Looking back calmly at the eight knowing criminals, Jubei's smirk turned sadistically gleeful. "You think you should fear those curse seals. Let me tell you, they are nothing compared to *these little babies.*"

Naruto was sweating. He wasn't sure whether it was because of the heat from the summer's sun or his own bodies tension and stress. But recognising the innocuously small and innocent looking scroll from one of his various flashing visions, Naruto knew a headache was coming onto him soon. */ Damn. Not those things, I didn't think I'd ever see them in action. /*

Truthfully, Naruto had only heard of the special black rings specifically developed by Jubei to act as chains for anyone who committed a sin, chains that would seal and rid a man of everything that makes him a human – his movement, his dignity, his freedom, basically a man's entire body. It was a deadly weapon that only Jubei can summon, but since the Gate Guardian Leader had never used it in practice before, there weren't many details on exactly what those innocent small black rings could do. Leaning forward, Naruto felt that he should take this opportunity to learn anything and everything he could about Jubei's own techniques, so that he could better utilise the Dokudes half breed in the future whenever the need arise.

Back to the arena floor, Jubei had finally unrolled the small scroll for all eyes to see. Among the long strip of black cloth, there was an imprint of white rings every few centimetres from one another printed

onto the cloth's surface. Dropping the opened scroll onto the floor, Jubei bit his thumb to draw out some blood and smoothly drew the bleeding appendage across the flat surface of the scroll, cutting across a number of printed rings. Instantly, smoke evaporated out the scroll as the small black rings were summoned forth, each only 10 centimetres in diameter, innocent-like and unassuming.

With a calm smirk still on his placid face, Jubei knelt down onto one knee, gently picking up one of the black rings and holding it up to the eye level of the eight prisoners before him. "These are my Tsumi no kuroiwa (Black Rings of Sins) (2). Each one of you will wear five of these on your body. These rings are all sealed to weigh the exact body weight of its victim, so by wearing five each, you will all be carrying five times your own body weight for the rest of your lives."

Twirling the delicate looking ring around his finger, Jubei continued his explanation, voice calm and gentle, as if mocking those of whom would become his victims in the near future. "I'll put one around each of your necks - to cut off your voice so that you won't be able to speak. It will also control the amount of food you are allowed to intake each day. Two will be placed on your wrists, stopping any unnecessary movements. Another two on your ankles, again restricting your movements."

Hyuuga Haizo, the old leader of the ex-councillors snorted in arrogance. "Just because you restrict our movements and our voice, do you think we will fear you? Never!" He replied haughtily, unafraid of what this young vagabond can do to his already aging body.

Jubei's smirk widened insanely. "Oh, but that's not all it can do. You see, these rings react instinctively to my will and my orders. They are sentient, as if they *are* a part of my conscious mind. If I think any of you have done something against me, or even THINK of going against me, I'll tighten the rings around your bodies, cutting off your air supply if it's your neck or your blood circulation in regards to your wrists and ankles. They are also Chakra infused, so as they come in contact with your skin, I am able to partially manipulate your own body's Chakra system, causing pain whenever and wherever I

please. But I won't kill you." He ended the suspenseful sentence abruptly.

Pausing dramatically, Jubei lifted an eyebrow before continuing with his taunting. "On the contrary, I have a job for you all to do. Not only would you have to bear the burden of your sins, until the time that I have deemed you completely repented, where by the rings will automatically turn white and switch off it's weight seal; but I will also have all of you work to restore my mother's lost dignity. All eight of you will be in charge of the welfare of my mother's grave for the rest of your miserable lives until I deem you worthy of mercy... I think that's poetic justice, don't you?" Jubei's smile had disappeared as a serious expression came over his face.

Hyuuga Haizo's face had paled listening to Jubei's last two sentences. Pain and suffering he could stand, his pride would not let him have it any other way. But to do manual labour in order to look after that witch's grave. His dignity, his pride... it would all be ruined. It would be so shameful of him to take care of the woman's grave, the same woman he had condemned to death. A sudden flare of anger erupted in the old man's heart. He was not a slave, he would not bow to such a miserable life; he would rather kill himself. And yet, he knew that once those rings had been attached to his body, even that choice would be out of his hands. There was no way Jubei would be so confident that his rings wouldn't kill any of the eight criminals. Jubei must have been a hundred percent sure that his rings would somehow ensure that the eight prisoners would survive, even if it had to force feed them food.

Haizo was no idiot. He understood why Jubei had chosen to place those five rings in five strategic places on their body. The throat in so far to ensure that the slaves would actually eat, the hands in order to control all their upper body movement and the legs in order to control exactly where the slaves were every single second of their lives. He knew that his entire existence would become nothing but a puppet, a puppet in which Jubei can manipulate to his will. No, this fate was far

worse than death itself, Haizo knew that he would be stripped away of his freedom, his life, and his humanity.

And yet there was absolutely nothing he could do as both his arms were grabbed roughly by his fellow Hyuuga members, before being pulled forward and exposed to Jubei's grinning face. Panicking, Haizo tried to pull his hands away from the sadistic boy, not wanting his freedom to be stripped away so effectively. But it was no use. Using mental summons, Jubei quickly and efficiently manoeuvred the rings flying through the air and attaching itself to said limbs and neck. Each ring had enlarged itself to fit through the head and limbs, before shrinking into the proper size and shape, tightening itself around the wrists, ankles and neck. Within seconds, the whole procedure was all over.

Once the entire procedure was over and done with, Jubei silently picked up his half empty summoning scroll, rolled it up and tied it back together, before pocketing the scroll into one of his waist pant's pockets.

Satisfied with the varied expressions now being displayed on the eight criminal's faces, ranging from pure rage, to absolute desolation, for the first time in a very long time, Jubei felt he had made his mother proud. He had finally found a way to give back to her some of her lost dignity, her pride. Turning away from the kneeling forms, Jubei spoke one last time before disappearing and returning to his seat next to Naruto on the VIP stand. "You will have three days in order to say goodbye to your kin. I assure you, three days from now, you will never see Konoha again." With that said, Jubei teleported himself away using his trusty golden rings.

Among the audience that had watched the display of these eight Hyuuga's humiliation and exile, sat Hinata and Hanabi. Both had felt a multitude of different emotions through out the whole ceremony, ranging from pity to anger, approval to disgust, impassive to outright emotional outburst. And yet, even in the end, they could not decide whether the entire event had been fair or not. They could not decide

whether the eight ex councillors had truly deserved such a harsh and yet at the same time justified fate. Finally shaking all her wandering thoughts away, Hinata stood from her seat resolutely, glancing one last time at the eight old men and women still kneeling on the arena floor, Hinata gave them a silent prayer before turning away and never looking back. Pulling gently at Hanabi's sleeve, Hinata motioned for them to leave. "It's time for us to go now. There's nothing here for us anymore." Her words shook Hanabi out of her own stunned silence. And together, hand in hand, the two sisters left the stadium, never looking back at the clan that had betrayed him, at the father that had abandoned them, at the men and women who had destroyed so many lives and ruined many others. Together they both prayed in their minds that all parties would be able to find their own redemption eventually, and hope feverishly that this would be the end of this chapter, and that the Hyuuga Clan can finally move on. Nothing lasts forever, you can't fight change, you can only accept it and move on.

The next day found Jubei, Hinata and Hanabi strolling down a deserted park some distance away from Konoha's main streets. All was quiet with nature's beauty displaying its elegance all around the three siblings as they walked down the grassy path silently, each with their own thoughts.

Naruto had finally managed to corner Jubei and made a small request that he come and spend some time with his supposed half-siblings before he and the other Gate Guardians finally take their leave three days after the sentencing of the Hyuuga ex-councillors. Even if Jubei had hated Hiashi with all his being, Naruto emphasized the fact that Hinata and Hanabi are innocent bystanders, just as he had been. They cannot help whom they were born under and they cannot control their clan's actions. But more importantly, they weren't even alive during that time and had nothing to do with the incident in the first place. After a long argument, Jubei finally agreed to go for a quiet stroll with the two girls, under the condition that Naruto NOT try

and interfere with their outing. Grumbling to himself, Naruto finally acquiesced to the condition and left the three alone to their walk.

Stopping abruptly during their stroll, Jubei turned and leaned against the trunk of a rather large tree. Turning to the two younger girls, Jubei asked in a calm but neutral voice. "You wanted us to *talk* , so lets *talk* ."

After an awkward silence hanging in the air, Hinata shifted slightly in nervousness, gathering her courage to start the conversation. "I... Um... I just... That is..." Struggling to find the right words to start off the 'talk', Hinata mentally wailed at herself. */ Stop Stuttering! You have to make a good impression! For goodness sake, HE'S YOUR BROTHER! /* She mentally yelled at herself. Forcefully stopping her fingers from fiddling with one another, she pulled them into tight fists by her side before taking a deep breath and trying again. "I'd like to apologise to you." The sentence slipped through her mouth out of nowhere.

Jubei lifted a delicate eyebrow, confused as to what she meant. "You have nothing to be sorry for." Turning away from the girl, he continued. "You weren't involved. Hell, you weren't even born yet. This has nothing to do with you at all."

"But it does." Running on a sudden rush of momentum, Hinata retorted harshly. "You're my BROTHER! And I didn't even know of your existence. I know that isn't my fault, but after finding out I actually HAD a brother, I should have tried to talk to you sooner. I should have tried to get in contact with you sooner, instead of leaving it until the last three days of your stay here in Konoha." The words flowed out her lips uncontrollably, detailing out all her past regrets and actions that she should have taken up instead of wallowing in self-pity and wasting time.

Beside her, Hanabi stood silently, watching in awe as her elder sister flush out all her confusion, her indecisions, her regrets and misgivings. In the past few weeks, Hanabi had seen a dramatic change happen in her sister. It was as if, once Hinata was taken out

of the environment of the Hyuuga clan, away from the harsh treatment from her father, the elders and other disappointed clan members, Hinata had found a stable niche in which to flourish. She had found confidence in herself, she had found great companionship with Maya, and made friends with the other Gate Guardians all on her own. It was as if Hinata had finally found 'herself' once she has escaped the confining pressures of being the Hyuuga heiress.

It wasn't that Hinata had completely changed. She still had her moments where she would blush uncontrollably, fiddle her fingers, cringe under other people's frowning faces or stutter in indecision. But overall, it was a great improvement on what she had been like before she had moved out of the house. Hanabi suspected that it was all partially due to the constant encouragement of Naruto, of whom Hanabi had found out her sister had a major crush on; as well as partially due to the support and encouragement of all Hinata's other friends.

Neji, Tenten, Lee, Kiba, Shino, Ino, Chouji, Shikamaru and even Sakura had found time during the last few weeks to visit Hinata at Naruto's apartment. The Uchiha was unable to attend (fortunately or unfortunately, Hanabi wasn't sure) due to the constant ANBU guards still surrounding him and also the fact that most days, he's under house arrest at his apartment.

It seemed as if the blonde boy's apartment had become some sort of social gathering ground or neutral territory in which people can just come and go as they please. Everyone had been very supportive of Hinata's move out of the Hyuuga Compound. And since they couldn't possibly avoid the presence of the Gate Guardians while staying in the apartment, small interaction and friendships had managed to sprout out due to the time they had spent together.

In Yami, Chouji had found a rival in the consumption of food. Though always skinny, Yami had the capacity to consume large amounts of food each day. He tells the Akimichi it was because of his body's natural metabolism, but Chouji couldn't help but feel jealous of

Yami's wily figure while eating as much if not more so than Chouji himself.

Tenten and Lee had latched onto Katana to train with them whenever the boy was near the vicinity and all three (though you would need to wrangle the truth out of Katana) had thoroughly enjoyed their sparing time together. Tenten had discovered that no matter how many weapons she threw at the boy, he could deflect it easily with his trusty swords. And in regards to speed, Katana could still beat Lee's speed if he tried slightly harder. Overall, both Tenten and Lee were inspired to train even harder than before if only to catch up to the short boy's current physique.

Tori and Akiko had managed to make friends with everyone and anyone they had met. The two's vibrant personality was very hard to dislike. Similar to them, Hikari and Koushiro had made good overall impressions towards anyone who had tried to get close to them. Maya had been difficult to open up at first, and even now, she still slipped into her quiet and shy states sometime. But with the help of Hinata, Maya too had made some dramatic headway in getting use to crowds and learning how to socialise with peers her own age.

That only leaves Jubei (who had been absent through out the entire last few weeks) and Mishizu, who still kept mostly to herself, even with the encouragement of others. The water user just doesn't seem to relate much with anyone born into the country of Fire. On the other hand, she seemed to have made great friends with Haku when Naruto introduced the two for the first time. Both had ex-Mist Shinobi ties and both still felt mixed feelings towards their original village. As such, the two had become quite close to each other.

Now, back to Hinata's current situation, the usually quiet girl was still ranting. It Jubei to hold his right hand up in a stop sign before Hinata finally got a clue to shut up and listen. Giving the now blushing girl an amused look, Jubei softly answered. "I never really blamed you or Hanabi for any of this." Looking at the shocked expressions on both Hinata and Hanabi's face, Jubei continued to explain. "I just hated

the fact that **he** had dared forgot about my own mother, that **he** dared to have a family again." He retorted, looking away.

Though his expression remained blank, Hinata could distinctly see a glimpse of anger and hurt in his similarly white eyes. Nodding her head in understanding, Hinata tried to change the mood in the atmosphere with something else that had occupied her mind for a long while, but unable to find the words. After a moments silence, a weary grin formed on her still blushing face. Giving a soft laugh – drawing the attention of both her older brother and younger sister, Hinata quickly explained what was so funny.

"It's ironic, isn't it? That both of us – yourself, Hanabi and I – had all be abandoned at some point in time by the same man and his family. Both of us had been burn supposedly into the most prestigious clans of our village and yet we were never acknowledged for our own existence." Bowing her head in slight misery, Hinata continued to explain. "I heard from Seiko that the Dokudes clan doesn't really see you as really part of the main family. As for myself... well... I'm too much of a disappointment in his eyes and well as the rest of the clan. I'm the black cloud of the family, the weakest link. To them, I'm unworthy of being heiress." Quickly wiping away a single tear from her eyes, Hinata gathered herself again and looked up at her older brother with understanding in her eyes. "I guess we're not so different, after all."

For the first time since returning to Konoha, Jubei smiled. Not a sarcastic or insane smile, but a true smile – something that actually reached his eyes and soul. Jubei was well known around Kuunoki as the smiling killer, but most of his smiles are part of a mask he wears all the time. It's very rare for Jubei to put on a true smile, very rare indeed.

Looking between her two older siblings, Hanabi felt a little bit left out, as if she wasn't even part of the conversation to begin with. She felt as if her sister and half brother was sharing a secret among themselves that she didn't understand at all, and that they were purposely keeping it a secret away from her. Shaking away these

thoughts, Hanabi gathered her own composure – something she had been lacking in the past few weeks.

In contrast to Hinata's growth in confidence and adaptability, Hanabi had been floundering in the massive changes that had been happening in her life. Just a few weeks prior, she had been the princess of the Hyuuga Clan, often referred to as the prodigy of the main house and indefinite future heir to the strongest clan in the Hidden Leaf Village. In just a few days, she found out she had an older, half-brother that her father had acknowledged and wanted to take over her role as the clan heir. Not only that, she discovered that her father never really cared much about her as a person, just as a 'potential' heir; this was then followed by being banished from her own household, the only home she had ever known.

Being squashed into Naruto's small (though empty) apartment had been a real eye-opener. Hanabi had been used to big, open spaces with plenty of rooms and servants to do your bidding. In Naruto's apartment, she had to make her own breakfast and do her own laundry – something Hanabi had never learnt to do, as that was what servants are for. It was all such a daunting and yet new experience. Everyday was an adventure as she learnt how to be more independent, how to be more self-reliant.

Making friends with the other Gate Guardians as well as some of her older sister's friends had also been an eye-opener for Hanabi. Being house trained all her young life, Hanabi had never really related to anyone of her own age or any children or teens in general. She just didn't know how to act.

Neji had been the first she felt comfortable with in the suddenly crowded apartment as they are technically family and have been living with one another for a very long time. Through Neji, she soon befriended the weird Rock Lee and the slightly more normal Tenten. Through her sister, she had befriended Kiba and Shino, though she still found Kiba's voice irritating and Shino's bugs creepy. The other Rookie Genin members soon joined the once very limited list of people Hanabi could call 'friends'. As for the Gate Guardians, Hanabi

had been trying her best to get to know Katana the best, followed by Tori (who always go where Katana goes anyway), followed by the rest of the Guardians.

Looking back between her sister and half-brother, Hanabi could finally admit to herself that she envied her sister and how the shy Hyuuga girl could make so many friends outside of their clan, while she herself, had been completely alone. It was a sad and lonely existence to not know a single person outside of your own clan.

Seeing Hanabi's despondent look from the corner of her eyes, Hinata suddenly shifted her attention to her younger sister. "You okay, Hana? You look kind of gloomy all of a sudden..." It was a new nickname that was given to Hanabi by none other than Naruto. But the name was catchy and soon, everyone was calling her by this shortened name instead of the full 'Hanabi'. After the initial outrage at having her name shorted unceremoniously for no apparent reason, Hanabi had gotten use to the nickname and acknowledges the call easily.

"Uh? Um... nothing." Blushing slightly in shyness, Hanabi shifted between her two older siblings, not sure as to what to do.

Blinking at her younger sister's suddenly shy countenance, Hinata suddenly understood that Hanabi was feeling slightly left out, as the younger Hyuuga was acting like how she usually acted when she was being ignored. Smiling gently, Hinata placed her hand on her sister's shoulder and pulled the smaller girl closer towards Jubei. Ignoring the flush on Hanabi's face and the girl's tense body, Hinata continued to smile as she looked upon Jubei's inquiring face. "And I also forgot to introduce you both properly. Jubei-nisama (Older Brother Jubei), this here is Hanabi, our younger sister. Hanabi, this is Jubei-nisama, our brother." Hinata had purposely left out the 'half' sibling technicality because in her mind, a family is a family, no matter whether they were half or adopted or whatever.

Understanding Hinata's hidden meaning, Jubei knelt down onto one knee until he was eye level with Hanabi. "Hello little one, my name is

Jubei. How are you?"

Blushing at all the attention, Hanabi tried to make a good impression. "Hello... Jubei-nisama. I'm fine thank you." She murmured softly.

Smiling gently at both girls, Jubei continued to act calm and gentle as their conversation continued. Soon enough, all three had settled to sit down exactly where they stood and talked about all sorts of things. Stories were shared, experience remembered and new understanding bloomed between the siblings. By the end of the day, the three had (for the first time) felt completely comfortable in each other's presence and may even go so far as to say that they are starting to reconcile with one another, as well as recognised each other as family.

The family talks and getting to know one another continued for the next two days until Jubei and the rest of the Gate Guardian's leave. In those two days, Hinata and Hanabi had slowly grown close to their older sibling. Neither having had a true role model other than their father, both Hinata and Hanabi had found Jubei to be a perfect gentleman and especially a supportive and gentle older brother. Jubei too, was finding it startlingly easy to fall into the role of being an older sibling. Having never had siblings to begin with, Jubei felt strange and yet excited at the same time due to the fact that for the first time in his life, he had people he could call family, people who could truly understand him and would accept him regardless of his status and power. It was comforting to know that each was not alone.

By the end of the third day, everyone was gathered by the outer perimeter gates to farewell the Gate Guardians as well as watch the entourage of Hyuuga prisoners to be sent to the Kuunoki. The entire Hyuuga clan had assembled as well to formally show their compliance with acknowledgement of Jubei, even if the Dokudes half-breed didn't appreciate their attention in the least.

Through out the calls and conversations of well wishes, and fare wells, Hiashi had made his way slowly and surely towards his only son, completely ignoring the tense expressions of his fellow

clansman and the glares of the other Gate Guardians. Watching from afar as his daughters both hugged Jubei with a closeness that he knew he would never share with the boy almost broke Hiashi's heart. He knew that Jubei would never forgive him for his sins, it was as apparent as the teenage boy's pale violet hair. But nonetheless, no matter the heartache, Hiashi still wanted to try.

After saying final goodbyes to Naruto, Hinata and Hanabi, Jubei's face suddenly changed to cold and unfeeling before he turned to face Hiashi. Jubei stared at Hiashi coldly and said in a steel voice: "I will never forgive you. You are a coward and you are weak. I hate weakness. Therefore I cannot forgive you for your sins." Pausing in affect, Jubei continued as his eyes strayed to the eight prisoners standing alone and helpless, each with their hands pressed tightly together in a praying motion, each unable to voice their pains of having to face the burden of their sins. "The eight may have paid for their sins, but you... you still deserve to suffer." Jubei finished in finality, before swiftly turning around and leaving the gates of Konoha with the other Gate Guardians following him.

Left behind with nothing by Jubei's cold words, Hiashi gave a heavy sigh and slumped his shoulders. "I'm sorry... I'm soo sorry... my dearest son." He whispered to the wind, wishing that one day he could find the courage to tell those exact words to his son, and pray for mercy. Looking back at Hinata and Hanabi's subdued expressions, Hiashi realised that he was truly alone for the first time in his life. His brother is dead, in an attempt to save his miserable life. His first and only love, died thinking that he had betrayed her in the most brutal way. His wife - could not take the heartache of marrying a man whom does not love her and slowly wilted away. His daughters he cast aside by his own hands in a stupid attempt to save them from his own outrageous plans to destroy the clan. And his son, the son that hates him more than anything else in the world. He was alone, always alone. Shutting his eyes tightly, Hiashi willed away the tears that wanted so badly to fall. / *Not now. Not yet. Not in*

front of everyone. I will cry when I'm alone, when I am able to let the tears fall. But not yet. /

Gathering his composure, Hiashi signalled for the rest of the clan to return to the Hyuuga Compound. Just before leaving, he turned once again to his two daughters, giving them a sad look, silently begging for forgiveness, Hiashi bowed lowly to the girls before turning away from them once again. */ I deserve to be alone. I deserve this loneliness. /* He thought to himself resolutely as his pride refused to let him reach out to the ones he loved, refused to let him wither and beg for redemption that he deeply prayed for. It was a never-ending cycle of self-torture. */ I don't deserve it. I don't deserve their forgiveness, and I don't deserve their trust. They're better off without me. /* Hiashi repeated over and over, hoping that he could convince himself into believing this false truth (3).

(1) Didn't I say I suck at romance! . Okay, even I have to admit that was crappy for an attempt at being romantically involved from Naruto's point of view. Oh well, I am trying... Uh... really, they're only what... twelve... thirteen at the most... they really shouldn't be thinking about getting into relationships so soon. I'll come back to it once they're like fourteen or something.

And Please, I don't want to read anymore reviews complaining about the pairings in this story! I've just been slanded by a reviewer who asked me to (and I quote) "stop wasting their time" by pairing Naruto with Hinata in this story. Really people, there's so little romance in here, it's not funny. I don't see a point of putting a warning up in my summary because there's hardly anything happening. And for those of you who are against the pairing in the first place, I'm sincerely sorry but that's the pairing I'm working with here. I have absolutely no problem with any of the pairings in the Naruto fandom, I've just chosen this one to work with here... because it's easier... I think. Anyway, my decision is FINAL!

(2) Believe it or not, these rings were originally inspired by an ancient Chinese text – the Journey to the West , in which one of the

antagonist characters ('Hong Hai Er' in Chinese – or basically translated to 'Red Child' in English or 'Kougaiji' in Japanese) was taken into the care of the Goddess of Mercy, and he also had to wear rings upon his arms that permanently locks his hands in a praying motion, never allowing the child to move his hands apart. I switched the usage of such a concept, instead of having it as a sign of devotion, I've made it into a sign of redemption from past crimes. Hope you guys don't think it's corny or anything.

(3) Um... yeah, Hiashi's a bit Out-of-Character, but then again, I think he's just very VERY tired of everything that has happened. He went from emotionally unbalanced to going slightly insane to having that power stripped away from him by the councillors, to having faced Jubei's constant hate and finally realising he's completely alone in a household that is filled with people who do NOT understand him. He's lonely and depressed. I hope you all can understand where I'm coming from.

Finally, the entire Hyuuga fiasco is done and over with. *Sigh* I can finally breathe a sigh of relief. Now onto the next LONG Chapter-link, namely **THE HIDDEN AIR CHUUNIN EXAM!** AHHHH! Finally, the LOOONNNGGG wait is over, and I can start implementing all the stuff I've been planning for since mid-last year.

For those who want to spoil yourself even before the story starts, you can go to my website and read up on the character profiles of ALL the original characters coming on board during the Chuunin Exam. Similar to the 10 Gate Guardians, I can't possibly try to give all the info to you on each character just through the story. I'll try but I highly doubt all the intricacies will be held together in a rigid format while I write. Anyway, keep your fingers cross that I can finish the next chapter soon-ish.

Invitations

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty One: Invitations

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: This chapter will mainly be plot development for the upcoming chapters. There will be a lot of jump scenes, please bare with me. It's all in an attempt to inspire suspense. There will also be a LOT of OCs appearing and confusion about but hopefully it'll all make sense at a later stage. Anyway, hope you enjoy!

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Okay, the start of this story is slightly different from any beginning I've ever tried before – in letter format. I just had this sudden inspiration to do it this way and hopefully, you will all appreciate the slight change in design. I (personally) liked how it turned out and I hope you all do too. Tell me what you think in your reviews!

Chapter 21

Dear Jubei-niisan,

It has been two weeks since your departure from Konohagakure no Sato and everything have pretty much settled down as it once were. You would be pleased to know that Hanabi has just recently entered the Ninja Academy for the first time, as father had forbidden her to do so before. She had made many friends since then, three of which are the infamous Konohamaru corp., introduced by none other than Naruto-kun. We are still living with Naruto-kun. The Hokage has offered us a new apartment but somehow I think Naruto-kun needs our companionship far more. He seems lonely now that all the Gate Guardians are gone. I too miss you all very much, especially you, niisan.

You would also be pleased to know that the new Hyuuga council have rejected father's proposal to have you take up the position of Hyuuga Heir Apparent. They say that no matter how legitimate an heir you are, you have not been brought up with the knowledge of Hyuuga history and tradition, and you know very little about Hyuuga politics. As such, they have also went against father and reinstated both my and Hanabi's status as Hyuuga Main House members. But when asked if we would still like to compete for the position of Hyuuga heiress, surprisingly, both Hanabi and I rejected the offer. It seems as if we siblings no longer desire the title anymore. It was especially surprising to see Hanabi let go of her childhood dream of becoming the best leader the Hyuuga have ever seen, but I think she wants to prove to herself that she can become strong all on her own, without the backing of the Hyuuga clan. I'm very proud of her and I know you would be too if you were here. She's really grown up a lot since our leaving the clan.

So now, after a week of debates, the Hyuuga Council has decided to have Neji-niisan to be the next Heir. You remember don't you, our cousin, the one Naruto-kun introduced to you back when we had that first gathering between Konoha ninjas and Kuunoki ninjas? It seems that the entire Hyuuga Clan has finally recognised Neji-niisan's genius in Ninja arts, and have made him a symbol of the progress

towards unification between the Main House members and the Branch house member. I'm really glad. Now, Neji-niisan will find himself in a position of great influence and he will finally be granted the power to change the Hyuuga Clan as he has always wanted. I believe he will become a very good leader for the Clan.

As for the rest of Konoha, life is continuing on as it has always been. Due to the promotions of Naruto-kun, Sakura-san and Shikamaru-kun from Genin to Chuunin, the Godaime Hokage has rearranged the rest of us Rookie Nine members in order to form two teams of three-man groups. From now on and until I become Chuunin, my new team consists of Kiba-kun (and Akamaru also) as well as Uchiha Sasuke-kun. Poor Shino-kun has been moved to join Ino-san and Choji-kun. He didn't seem to like the change very much as he had gotten use to working with us as a team. But the Godaime Hokage explained that in the future, each of us would be forced to work with people we know very little about, and this endeavour is to strengthen our own adaptability to form teams and work well together. Oh, and I'm still under the guidance of Kurenai-sensei, but she didn't seem to be very happy being stuck with Sasuke-kun though. I hope they get along.

Sasuke-kun is still under strict surveillance but has been allowed to undertake short C-class missions within the village itself. That is why we, as a team, spend most of our missions within the village rather than outside. Kiba-kun has been complaining about this, but since he's been increasing his strength sparing against Sasuke-kun, he usually doesn't complain as much or as loud as you would expect him to. I too, am being kept busy between training with Neji-niisan (who has decided to help me with my Hyuuga Jyuken) as well as undertaking Medical training with Sakura-san and Choji-kun. We are the first generation of students registered for the Medical Academy, a school set up by the Godaime Hokage herself. Kurenai-sensei has also remarked that each of us have showed marked overall improvement. Not only that, but Kakashi-sensei turns up now and again to spar and train each of us individually. True, he is still mainly here for Sasuke-kun's training in the use of the Sharingan as well as

to keep an eye out on the curse seal, but since he's helping us as well, I really don't mind his presence. Though, after the first time Kurenai-sensei burnt his little orange book (I'm still not sure what 'Icha Icha Paradise' mean), he rarely reads anything in front of us children again. Though, I wonder sometimes.

Anyway, I'm sure you know that Naruto-kun has been training extremely hard lately and undertaking a lot of B-rank and even some A-rank missions for Konoha. He has been working with some of the best Chuunins and Jounins in the village. It seems that after the Chuunin Exam invasion, and especially this latest attempt by Orochimaru, the people of Konoha have really started to see Naruto-kun in a different light. He's slowly starting to earn the respect of the older villagers, while being seen in awe by the younger generation (all thanks to Konohamaru-kun's praising I'm sure), and even gaining the attention of a few fan-girls. That last point, I'm not very happy about.

Anyway, enough about me, what about you? How have you been? How are Maya and the others? ... Hanabi is currently tugging on my sleeve asking me to ask you how are Tori-kun and Katana-kun... especially Katana-kun. (Pssh. Hanabi just left, slamming our bedroom door behind her... I think she was blushing). Anyway, I think I'll end my letter here. Please keep in touch.

P.S. If you're wondering how I am able to write such a letter and be sure that it will eventually reach you, Naruto-kun has assured me that one of his fox summons – I believe his name was 'Kibi', would be able to deliver this letter to you directly.

I've got to go now. Write to you next time.

From your dearest sister

Hyuuga Hinata.

Folding the letter back to its originally squarish shape and slipping it into his pant's pockets, Jubei gave a small grin in heartfelt contentment.

Akiko, standing behind him and having read the letter, gave him a cheeky grin. "Do you think she'll know what hit her?" She asked in all excitement.

Jubei's small grin turned sadistic. "Not a clue in the world. I'm not even sure Naruto-sama is expecting such a turnout."

"Good. All the better when we cut their lifelines." Katana countered cruelly from the sidelines.

"And all the more fun!" Tori jumped up in anticipation.

"Well, what are we waiting for then? We've got the invitations and we have our orders, lets go!" Punching his fist in the air, Koushiro called out passionately.

"Yes. Let's." Mishizu hissed in affirmation, and even she had a slight grin on her face, trying to hide the anticipation but being unable to.

In an instant, all ten Gate Guardians of the Hidden Air village left the clearing, leaving nothing behind but a slight breeze, each heading towards a different location and each with a different mission in hand. This was going to be exciting indeed, for never in all the history of the Kuunoki would they ever invite so many to enter the forbidden gates of the most least known village in the world – the Hidden Air itself.

"So... what does this all mean exactly?" The young woman looked uninterestingly down at the kneeling form of Hikari from her flower patterned throne and curtains, hands still holding onto the nondescript scroll that the elite ninja before her had given her some minutes ago.

It isn't everyday a so-called 'ambassador' from the mysterious Hidden Air village visits your lowly kingdom after all. In fact, the country of Spring has only just been rejuvenated and renamed in the past year and a half. The economy is still growing slowly and the country itself is still not very well known, though tourists had been starting to enter the beautiful country and more movie directors have come to shoot the fantasy like scenery for their productions. Had it not been for the real life drama that had become of Fujikaze Yukie's life (1), turning out to be none other than the lost princess – Kazehana Koyuki, the newly formed Spring country may have gone downhill economically. It was all due to the background support and financial backing of Yukie's acting career that kept the country going, not needing to return to the arms trade that her deceitful uncle had control over. Overall, the once highest paid actress in the world – Fujikaze Yukie or more precisely, princess and ruling of the once Snow Kingdom - Kazehana Koyuki – was glad that her country was moving away from the military might it once had. Because of her background with the military, she became rather suspicious about this supposed once in a lifetime offer of entering the Chuunin Exam held in the prestigious village hidden in the air.

"It means exactly what it says it means, Koyuki-hime (Princess Koyuki). The ninjas of the Hidden Snow are invited to participate in the first Chuunin Examination held within the wall of the hidden Air Village. This is the first attempt that the village had ever invited such a large contingent, a once in a lifetime opportunity." Hikari explained patiently.

"And why should I send my troops to enter. I'm not a big fan of the military. Issues should be sorted out by diplomacy, not by force. I do not condone these exams where young men and women literary fight for their lives, all in an effort to raise a single rank. It's just not worthy enough it in my book." Koyuki answered succinctly, she is still very skeptical about the offer.

"No matter how much you may hate military force, Princess; you cannot deny that as long as you have borders, your country will need

some sort of military support, if only to ensure stability and security of your countries survival. There are many countries in this world that either depend on the help of neighbouring countries or have their own small paramilitary regiment to ensure their survival. You cannot, in all good conscious, disband your own current forces. Not only do you *need* them, but they also have a *need* to survive. If you have no use of them, they will simply become what is known as Missing Nins and join other organisations, perhaps becoming an obstacle against yourself in the future." Hikari said in a firm voice, never wavering in her own belief.

"All I'm asking here is for you to ask your following Shinobis, of whom would volunteer to enter the Hidden Air Chuunin Exam. As I've said before, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. It's not just about the rise in rank that they could attain; it's also about the special training that they will receive if they pass the exam requirements. This could be their only opportunity to learn something completely new to them and who knows where it will take them in the future. It's not just your future, princess, but theirs as well. Give them the choice." Hikari finally concluded. "The only stipulation we have for the whole thing is that the rules are the same as any other Chuunin Examination participant. They must enter in a team of 3 and they must have completed at least 6 D-rank missions and 1 C-rank mission to be able to apply."

Koyuki continued to look at the teenage girl before her skeptically before finally resigning herself to speak with her Shinobi forces, of which there weren't many. The once Hidden Snow village within the Spring Country had dwindled massively, as most of the so-called Shinobis were nothing more than men in samurai garb.

During the uprising 10 years ago started by her evil uncle, Kazehana Dotou, her father and the late king had died, leaving her the only heir to the throne. Kazehana Dotou had at first hired missing Nins from the surrounding countries and formed a new Ninja village – the Hidden Snow Village. But this army was small and its members heavily dependent on chakra armour and other weaponry. As such,

he strengthened their numbers by hiring local thugs and other samurai members.

The true Shinobis of the hidden snow, still loyal to the late king had mostly fled. And in the last two years, as she slowly worked her way through cleaning up her beloved country, most of these once loyal Ninjas had returned to serve her in atonement of failing to protect her father. She had at first refused their services but when they managed to save her life from several assassination attempts, she changed her mind and kept them as a small paramilitary group, given power to stabilise their country and ensure security for their citizens.

Overall, there was only around 50 or so actual ninjas in the force and most of them of Genin to Chuunin rank, but that was enough for Koyuki. She didn't need them to be any stronger and as long as they were loyal to her, everything was fine.

But now that the opportunity had arisen, perhaps she really should give her loyal subjects the chance to improve themselves for their own benefits, not just for the country, but she would leave that to their own decision. She would not force them.

Three days later, a group of three young Shinobis stood before Princess Koyuki requesting her permission in order for them to enter the Hidden Air Chuunin Exam. Their names were as follows: Naja Daiku, Gojou Hikon and Yuse Samure. Koyuki looked upon the two males and one female ninjas in her very small force and gave each one a smile before officially signing her name on the scroll that was to represent their entry permit to the Hidden Air Village.

Behind the massive doors to the throne room, Hikari leaned nonchalantly against the icy wall, a small smile on her face while she dreamt up all the ways she could test them on the way to the Hidden Air village. After all, the very moment they signed their own names in their own blood onto the scroll, the exam itself has already begun. / *Let the games begin.* / Hikari thought to herself gleefully.

In the far distance, within several different villages in many different countries, the same scene was repeated and the same process had been undertaken, resulting in many more teams signing up to participate in this special Chuunin Exam taking place in none other than the Hidden village of air.

In the Hidden Mist village, many teams had signed up to participate, but Mishizu was sure to cut the numbers down to only one by the time they actually reach the Air village gates. After all, she didn't want anyone to think that she was slacking off on her job as a Chuunin Examination proctor. Behind her icy visage, Mishizu grinned cruelly in anticipation.

In the Hidden Cloud village, three teams had been sent, three elite teams which the Raikage personally recommended, or in affect, ordered to participate. Things would certainly turn out interesting for Koushiro, who would be their examiner until they reach the gates of the hidden Air. Punching his fists in the air, he yelled enthusiastically to the three genins 'to impress him no matter what, or else he won't pass them'. However, even though he was outwardly welcoming, he knew he would probably decimate their forces until only one worthy team was able to enter.

In the Hidden Stone village, again, only one team had been selected to participate, but that was only because of the fact that all other teams were unable to leave the village due to the severe restrictions of the Shinobi's movements in the world. But none of this mattered at all to Tori; he was just planning to have fun with his 'team' before they even think about their chances in the main exam itself.

In the Hidden Sand, Gaara had given one glare at the ruling council and everyone had agreed to let the infamous Sand siblings leave to enter the Chuunin Exam. Other teams had tried to enter but again,

due to the insufficient number of Shinobis the village had, other team had been refused the privilege of leaving. Akiko smiled widely at this team, knowing that no matter how hard she tested them, they would pass with flying colours.

Some distance away in the Hidden Grass, Katana was twitching in response to the number of teams this village had sent to participate in the Chuunin Exam, but Katana was focused and assured himself that he would cut the numbers down in half if not only leaving one team alive to pass.

Seiko looked upon the large groups of arrogant genins standing in front of her and snorted in disbelief. She had been given the extra tasks of travelling to both the Hidden Rain village and the Hidden Waterfall in order to gather willing genins to participate in the Chuunin Exam of the Hidden Air. Having either performed rather badly or not at all in the previous exam in the Leaf Village, both potential villages have gathered a large turn out of genins, all of which were pathetically weak in Seiko's eyes. */ I think I'll fail all of them at this rate, not a single one of them have the potential to survive in a week of my personal torture... eh.. testing sessions. Well, it's their graves. /*

Maya silently looked over the group of genins standing before her, all bearing the head protectors of the Hidden Star Village upon their forehead (2). "Ano... you **all** want to join the Chuunin Exam of the Hidden Air?" She asked softly, tilting her head ever so slightly to the right, as if gently asking them to reconsider their choices. After all, they had only just recovered from the affects of their 'star' training, of which has just recently been destroyed, thank god.

Though Maya did not have an Uchiha's Sharingan or a Hyuuga's Byakugan and therefore was unable to see the still recovering body's innards and how it had been severely damaged by the dangerous

chakra of a mysterious asteroid that had fallen upon the village many hundreds of years ago. BUT! She did however have her exceptional senses when it comes to the natural and supernatural world. She could literary 'feel' the pulsing 'wrongness' that still vibrates upon and around the children's bodies before her.

Even though some of them are no older than her self, some even older in fact, but Maya – as a Gate Guardian, feels it's her duty to explain to them how close they really got to having died. */ And they expect to be able to participate in **our** Chuunin Exam? I really don't that they could even survive a week in their current conditions! /* Her mental self had recently developed due to the constant exposure to Naruto-sama's Konoha friends, especially in regard to Sakura and Ino.

From the first moment that Maya had met Sakura, she could automatically feel the strange two-personality clash living in the same body. It was such a phenomenon that Maya had surreptitiously watched Sakura from afar and always tried to stay close to the girl in order to read her aura. It was absolutely fascinating how Sakura can suddenly revert to her 'inner-Sakura' (as Sakura once described) whenever she gets angry enough. It seems the two personalities, though so drastically different in attitude and posture, ultimately had the same heart and thought patterns, only one is more extreme than the other.

After continued exposure to Sakura and her strange mental ways, Maya had once discussed her findings with Ino, who was a member of the Mind Walker (3) clan in Konoha – the Yamanaka. Ino only confirmed Maya's findings and even brought along some of her own 'theories' as to why and Maya quotes 'Big-forehead girl has two freaking personas in one freaking body.'

Over time, Maya soon tried to develop her own 'inner' persona, if only to be able to rely on said persona during certain situations, especially relating to large crowds and having to speak to said crowd. She wasn't as successful in developing a completely different persona to her own, but she has been able to create a persona of

similar value but far more sarcastic and open with her opinions. This is what Maya calls her 'inner voice' or 'mental voice'. It's fascinating what her 'inner' voice randomly sprouts through out the days.

Anyway, having drifted away from the moment, Maya forced her attention back to the situation at hand. A boy, slightly taller than her and having long dark blue – almost black hair tied into a short braid behind him, stood forward, indicating himself as the official spokesperson of the group of Star Genins (4). "Yes, we would all like to participate in the Chuunin Exam held by the Air, is there any problem with that?" He glared at her hotly as if daring her to object.

Gulping away her nervousness and ignoring her inner voice's shout of indignation at the utter disrespect, Maya gave the boy a strained smile in reply. "O... Of course I don't have a problem with that... Bu... But are you absolutely sure? There... There's going to be some deaths on the way and stuff... I just... just don't want you all hurt and stuff, right?" Maya could literally feel herself shrinking as the increasing glares from the rest of the Genins focussed completely on her.

/Man! What is their PROBLEM? Can't they freaking see that they're in nooooo way ready for regular training, let alone fight in a Chuunin Exam – and one made of our standards at that. Hah! They'd be lucky to survive a DAY at their current Chakra levels/ Her inner voice ranted at her to be more forceful. */ Ruri-sama would NOT want us to go easy on them, but with their pitiful chakras as they are, there's no way they'll be able to survive an encounter with Qwee (5) let alone some of our other summons...* / Maya pushed aside her inner voice's rant and gathered a deep breath before calming herself in order to continue her explanations.

/ Breathe deeply. Hold. Release. And relax. / Maya muttered to herself mentally, repeating what Hinata had once told her about a technique she used to calm herself down in a tense situation. Hopefully it will also pull Maya out of her nervous state in order to deal directly with the hopeful but forceful Genins before her.

Gathering her courage, Maya set forth to do the one thing she had always been rather weak at – scolding a crowd of people. "Let me rephrase my question." Looking at the boy standing directly before her, Sumaru she believes he introduced himself as. "Do you truly believe, that in your **current** state of body, that you actually have a chance at the Chuunin Exam?" Her voice never wavered. Maya mentally cheered loudly and she could just imagine her inner voice doing a little dance in celebration. She really was making progress in upping her confidence and speaking-to-crowds tendencies.

However, the boy before just narrowed his eyes further in anger. "And what's **WRONG** with us that you would refuse our request!" He demanded an answer.

Sighing in defeat, Maya conceded that perhaps the truth is the best way forward. Taking another deep breath, Maya consciously released more of her inner voice than she had ever done previously. "Look." She actually took a threatening step forward in order to emphasize her point. "I know that you have your heart set out on winning the Chuunin Exam and then somehow earning an apprenticeship with one of our masters. But truthfully, from what I can see and feel of your bodies' condition at the moment, you won't stand a chance. Why do I know this? It's because I'm suppose to act as an initial proctor, getting rid of all unnecessary and unworthy participants for the Chuunin Exam so that we can get to the main stuff as soon as possible. And I'm sorry, but I will not let you pass even the initial preliminary exam. None of you are ready for it yet." Maya finished with a huff, releasing her inner voice's pent up irritation.

"And how can you tell? You haven't even fought us! We have special techniques! We have..." Sumaru rebuffed in heated argument, really upset that this girl who is practically the same age as him would refuse to let him participate. He hates being looked down upon and that's exactly what she's doing. Unfortunately, his semi-rant was cut short by Maya's interruption.

This time, Maya didn't need to consciously release her inner voice's personality upon the group, it just happened on its own. "What you have left is the remains of the 'star's chakra inside your bodies. But that chakra is dissipating with time. Soon, you won't be able to use your mysterious peacock techniques anymore. To go straight to the point, you are all useless without the 'star's chakra, and you know why, it's because you rely on it too much. You are unable to do anything without the alien reinforced chakra. I'm pretty sure you don't even know what your original chakra's are like in the first place. And another thing, you will be unable to attempt the techniques you've learnt before with your normal chakra, it just won't mesh and in the end, it will simply cause you more pain. The only way out of this situation and for you all to grow is to relearn everything using your own normal chakra, from basic chakra control onwards. None of you have had time yet to do this and none of you are worthy in my eyes anyway. You all simply don't have the talent or the skill at the moment." Maya was being brutally honest, following in her inner voice's motions of telling people exactly what she truly thought of them and why.

The ensuing silence was deafening.

Reverting back to her once timid self, Maya could only gaze back at the group of children with pure sympathy in her eyes. "I'm sorry but I'm not going to pass any of you. In fact, I'd rather not take the chance at all and will refuse your entry to the exam in the first place. At least this way, I won't be forced to hurt you all in order to make you quit. Truly, none of you are ready yet. In a few years time, I'm sure you'll be more than capable, but now is not the time." With that said, Maya grabbed her original scroll from Sumaru's limp hand before turning around and running away from the still stunned group (6).

Once she was far away enough, she pressed two of her fingers upon her covered lips before producing a sharp whistle. Soon a giant black bird landed before the girl, and Maya gingerly climbed upon its

back before both bird and master flew off into the distance, leaving behind broken dreams and heartache.

I I'm sorry for being so blunt. But I really didn't want to hurt any of you. I have to do my job and if I don't, it will eventually come back and bite me. Not to mention, Ruri-sama and the others will not be so kind to the participants either. I'm sorry. / A small tear fell from Maya's jade green eyes before she looked away from the almost deteriorating village in the midst of economic downturn due to the recent destruction of the 'star' as well as the slowly waning prowess of their Shinobi, the Hidden Star Village was slowly going downhill and they will soon either find themselves joining another village or completely ceasing to exist.

Orochimaru raised a delicate eyebrow at the black clan figure standing calmly before him. "Well, this is a surprise. I didn't think that after our... misunderstanding... that Ruri would want anything to do with me or the Hidden Sound Village at all." Re-rolling up the scroll, the Snake sannin placed it delicately on a side table. He could just feel the tension in the air, especially the malice pulsing from his right hand man, Kabuto, who was standing on five feet behind him. The presence of a Gate Guardian must be affecting Kabuto's old blood, it's almost at boiling point.

"Be wary of how you refer to the leader of the Hidden Air. You may call her by her title 'Lady Oracle' or simply 'the Lady Uzumaki', but never by name. I hope you will remember this next time, Orochimaru-san." Yami nonchalantly flicked some nonexistent dirt off his pristine black shirt, completely disregarding Orochimaru and Kabuto with an arrogant flair. "And it's not all white roses for you either. I believe that you've read somewhere on the scroll the 'special' clause that specifically states that you are not to have any contact with any other villages while your *genins* are still within the confines of the Hidden Air village. You will have to sign that clause before they can enter."

Hiding his fury at the boy's disregard, Orochimaru continued with a sweet voice lined with icy threats. "And if I don't..."

Yami glared right back with cool, violets eyes. "Then you will see what 50 or so Air masters can do to your village when only 10 of us foiled your entire invasion of Konoha. I don't think you'd like the results." The icy silence hung in the air for several minutes.

Schooling his expression to a calm visage once again, Orochimaru cut to the chase. "Why invite the Sound village then? Why even bother if you consider me an enemy?"

Yami shrugged. "Just like Konoha had invited both the Cloud and Stone to join their Chuunin Exams, it's simply a matter to protocol. Whether you accept or not is your business. I won't stop you. However, be aware that we will know if you make any moves towards anyone. You are being watched, very closely, Orochimaru-san. Not just by your colleagues in Akatsuki, but the rest of the world, and even the dead..." The ambiguous meaning of Yami's last words left Orochimaru frowning but he did not ask the boy to explain. After all it would be an insult to his pride.

/ So... Even the dead, huh? Does that mean that even the Seven High Councillors are interested in my actions (7)? But why? Perhaps they're afraid of what I might do against their precious Uzumaki heir? After all, they only have one left, be he Prophet or Breed house. I'll have to watch what I do very carefully from now on. / Orochimaru thought to himself silently. */ Still, this **is** an opportunity of a lifetime, it would be good to get a spy or two into the Hidden Air village and see what they can get out of the place for me. The Hidden Air is one place I haven't been able to intrude and discover their jutsus.*

Perhaps there's something there I can use in the future... / Orochimaru continued to think over the proposition, ignoring both Yami's blatant disrespectfulness and Kabuto's continued furious presence.

Soon, Kabuto couldn't stand Yami's nonchalance anymore, having a need to vent and kill something or someone, preferably the black

clad boy directly in front of his master. "Watch your own tongue, boy. This is the Otokage you're talking to, not some two-bit amateur." He rebuffed back even while he tensed his shoulders in preparation for a fight.

Yami simply blinked at him before developing a small smile on his face. "Amateur? Perhaps by our standards he is." With this comment, Kabuto was instantly prepared to kill the boy right here right now, if not for Orochimaru's raised hand, commanding silence with one single movement.

"Calm down, Kabuto. Yami-kun is an 'ambassador' of *peace* . We do not kill ambassadors of peace, especially not a special one from the Kuunoki." Looking back at Yami, Orochimaru stretched his mouth open widely in a smile, like a snake would while looking directly at its prey. "As for the offer, Yami-kun. You can tell our 'Lady Oracle' that I accept her offer and will be sending forth an elite team of my own. They will be organised by three days time and will leave with you whenever you're ready. Once they have arrived, you can witness all of our signing of the contract. How about that, Yami-kun?"

Bowing demurely before Orochimaru, Yami smiled gently. "It's a *pleasure* to do business with you, *Otokage-sama* . I will await your summoning three days from now in order to meet my new charges." That said, Yami disappeared into a mass of black sand particles before the mass quickly scattered from the room, squeezing through all available holes in order to escape the place, leaving no trace behind as to the boy's presence once being in the room.

Silence reigned for some time.

Leaning back onto his seat, Orochimaru relaxed slightly before chuckling suddenly in sardonic laughter. "Well, that went well." He chuckled.

"Hmph. No respect at all." Kabuto glared at the spot where Yami once stood.

Orochimaru smirked at his subordinate. "Jealous, Kabuto? It's not like you at all."

"I am not jealous." Kabuto's eyes narrowed further as he tipped his glasses up in a practiced manner, but to Orochimaru, it looked more nervous than anything else.

Looking back over at the spot the dark clad boy once stood, Orochimaru wondered. "That was the boy who fought Sasori to a standstill. From what some of the witnesses say, he has the ability to dissipate his own body into a mass of black particles. From what I can see of his demonstration previously, he really does dissipate his own body into its molecular form before disappearing from sight." Tapping a finger onto his chin, Orochimaru's sickly yellow eyes glazed in wonderment. "I wonder what it would be like to have a body like that. Completely impenetrable to any physical attacks, completely immune to poison, and possibly will never suffer a single injury ever. The ultimate body, would you say Kabuto?"

If possible, Kabuto's teeth grind tightly together even more at seeing the hint of desire in his master's eyes. "I highly doubt that it would be any easier than getting Uzumaki Naruto's body, Orochimaru-sama. And I also highly doubt that you would be able to learn many jutsus using that boy's body, he does seem to be highly specialised and any outside jutsus may affect him more than we know. The limited knowledge we have on the Air is dangerous to us at the moment. I suppose that was why you accepted the deal in the first place, right? So that we can send in a spy of our own, correct?"

"Your wisdom astounds me once again, Kabuto." Orochimaru praised.

Bowing in respect and in gratitude, Kabuto asked in a calmer voice than before. "So, do you have any idea who we should send?"

Orochimaru smiled cruelly. "Oh yes, I know exactly who to send."

Waiting in silence, Kabuto soon figured out that Orochimaru wouldn't elaborate until he asked. And in this moment, curiosity overwhelmed Kabuto's own sense of self-perseverance. Coughing discreetly, Kabuto continued: "So, who exactly to you have in mind, Orochimaru-sama? I will organise the Genin teams as you see fit."

Orochimaru chuckled again. "Oh, you won't have to do much at all, Kabuto. I was only thinking about putting my experiment – you remember 'Zero' right? And perhaps Suzumi in the same team, and then add another one of my... special subordinates."

Kabuto tensed. "Suzumi? My sister? (8)" Gulping down his nervousness, Kabuto almost dreaded to ask. "May I ask Orochimaru-sama, why would you send my sister into the frontline? She's a pathetic Genin and a terrible fighter overall, she would be useless to us as a spy. And more so than that, Zero is... well Zero is unpredictable... She responds well to command during some instances and not during others, even though there is no questioning her fanatical loyalty to you. Everyone else however, won't even make a tiny dent in her impenetrable visage. How can we be sure that she will listen to us on such an important mission? And..."

Raising a hand a second time, Orochimaru called for silence once more. "Be quiet Kabuto! My decision is final. Your sister will act as the best distraction for our team, not only as a pathetic genin but also as the other Dokudes half breed that they will have to content with. I'm sure the Dokudes Clan will throw a fit once they meet her. Do NOT tell her about our purpose behind their entrance to the Chuunin Exam. And as for 'Zero' (9), you don't have to worry about her. She is still as loyal to me as any dog of the military would, and not to mention I still hold her dear 'father's life in my hands, she'll cooperate just fine. I know how she *thinks*, after all, she's just **like** me. By the way, I'll need to give her a name. We can't put her down as 'Zero' after all. Any suggestions?" Looking at Kabuto's pale visage, Orochimaru cackled gleefully mentally while suppressing any emotion from showing on his slimy face.

Swallowing his dread, Kabuto answered his master. "I believe the doctor has already given her a name – it's Kageru, Kageru Sasayaki, named after the doctors' long deceased daughter."

"Kageru it is than." Orochimaru nodded resolutely before standing up and heading towards the door.

"Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto called out abruptly.

Stopping in mid-motion but not turning around to face his subordinate, Orochimaru's nasal voice snorted in irritation. "What is it now, Kabuto?"

"Who is the last member of team Sound?" Kabuto asked calmly if slightly nervously.

Orochimaru smirked, but he knew Kabuto couldn't see. "I think I'll call it 'Mogoto', Mogoto Genkaku. (10)" With that said, Orochimaru strolled confidently out the door, leaving behind a less than confident Kabuto in his wake.

"EHHHH! What the hell are YOU doing HERE **AGAIN** ?" Tsunade screeched rather loudly upon seeing Jubei sitting rather nonchalantly in HER chair, in HER office, looking out HER window with a delicate smile on his face.

Waving his hand in a dismissing manner, Jubei continued to smile at the irritated Hokage. "Now now, that's no way to treat a guest, is it? Godaime Hokage-sama."

Tsunade's eyebrow twitched three times. "Get. Off. My. Chair." She rumbled in rage before lifting up a single finger in retaliation.

Not wanting to be crushed under the Hokage's powerful finger, Jubei instantly teleported himself (using his rings of course) to the other side of the room, sitting relaxingly on a large couch.

Eyebrow continuing to twitch, Tsunade strode forcefully to her chair and sat down heavily, all the while glaring at the smiling boy. "Shizune." She growled, eyes never leaving the stationed boy.

"HAI!" Shizune called out in nervousness, beads of sweat literally rolling down her brow as she stood stiffly before her irritated mistress.

"Get Naruto in here NOW." Tsunade growled again. Without waiting for further comment, Shizune immediately rushed out the room, trying desperately to escape her mistress's legendary temper. All the while, Shizune was holding on to poor pon-pon (the pig) shivering in fear within her arms.

A few minutes passed in aching silence before the door was suddenly opened to reveal none other than the aforementioned Uzumaki Naruto. He quirked an eyebrow upon seeing Jubei's smiling face and Tsunade's irritated one. Sighing slightly in exasperation, Naruto stood straight in military fashion. "You called for me, Hokage-sama."

Eyebrow twitching, Tsunade snapped rather rudely. "Yes, I did. Mind telling me what the hell is *he* doing here again?"

Naruto could only shrug his shoulder in reply. "I wouldn't have a clue, Tsunade-san. I haven't been receiving any more visions lately as I've only just learnt how to suppress them all. I don't want to rely on them too much so I've disregarding it for a few weeks now. Have you asked Jubei *himself* why he's here instead of calling for me?" Naruto asked delicately, lifting an eyebrow in question.

Tsunade ground her teeth together. Today just wasn't her day. She had only just finished up a huge pile of paper work (now that Hiashi is no longer her 'paper' assistant, she had no one to handle the work load so she had to do it herself). However, in just a few minutes, Shizune brought in another huge pile of paper for her to look over. What was she, a paper-pusher? She was the damn Hokage for goodness sake. And when she snuck away from her work in order to

grab a drink, her assistant caught her before she could even take a single mouthful and dragged back to her office, only to meet the irritating Dokudes-Hyuuga hybrid sitting in HER chair as if he OWNED it. So yeah, Tsunade was having a rather bad day.

Glaring at the smiling Jubei, Tsunade finally snapped. "TALK! What are you doing here!"

Jubei gave her another charming smile before standing up swiftly and pulling out a scroll from his pocket and giving to the Hokage to read. "I believe the scroll will explain everything."

"A Chuunin exam huh? Has it been six months already since the last exam hosted here in Konoha? Tsunade frowned slightly at the implications of this invitation.

Naruto tilted his head back slightly in thought. "Now that you mention it, yeah. It has been almost 6 months since the last exam. I never realised how fast time flies when we're all so busy. But I thought it's supposed to be held in a different village each time."

Tsunade nodded at his question and replied. "That's true, it's suppose to be held by Sand this time, but since the last Chuunin Exam, their forces still haven't recuperated enough to attempt such a mass event. Not to mention, they still haven't even selected their next Kazekage yet. I think they're waiting for that friend of yours – Gaara – I believe his name to be, to grow up and mature a bit first before promoting him to the position. And since Sand wasn't able to do it, none of the other three villages – as in Cloud, Stone and Mist, are willing to take up the mantle considering everyone is edgy about the new power rising out of the woodworks – the Sound. So I guess, it's not surprising that this would be a perfect opportunity for the Hidden Air to host. However, I'm wondering what the Air gets out of this arrangement. It's not like the village is even big enough to have hundreds of participants enter. I don't even think they're big enough for 50 or so participants. (11)"

Jubei shrugged in nonchalance. "By the time the participants actually reach the village gates, they'd be cut down to a minimal number. I don't expect we will have any more than 30 or so participants by the start of the actual exam itself." He answered confidently. "So I would suggest not sending anyone you think won't be able to make it to the actual exam itself. It would be a waste of both my time and their lives." He concluded cruelly, knowing that Tsunade would know exactly what he meant by that comment. After all, during Tsunade's time in the Hidden Air Village, she had been exposed to the training regimes of the Air Ninjas and the complete distance in standards had shocked her.

She knew exactly how tough it was going to be for the teams she chooses to reach the gates of the Air, and she also had a fair idea on who could and couldn't make it. She wasn't Hokage for nothing. Sitting up slightly in a posture of strength, Tsunade called for Shizune again. "I want you call before me the following people: Hyuuga Neji, Ten Ten, Rock Lee, Uchiha Sasuke, Hyuuga Hinata, Inuzuka Kiba, Yamanaka Ino, Akimichi Chouji, Aburame Shino and their sensei's."

Bowing in respect, Shizune quickly left in order to gather the aforementioned people. Soon, Tsunade's smallish office was filled with people, all curious as to what she had asked them in for. They include all the once Rookie-nine genins, their sensei's and a few other people, including Shikamaru (who was with Chouji at the time and decided to tag along), Sakura (who was with Ino and also decided to tag along), as well as Jiraiya (who had heard somewhere that Jubei was in town and decided to pay the boy a visit as well as to find out what's going on).

Upon seeing her brother for the first time in weeks, Hinata displayed something that she had never done before, she actually 'hugged' her half-brother in front of everyone in the room, to the shock of everyone else of course. It seems that Hinata had truly made some massive progress in displaying her emotions outwardly. Though still conservative most of the time, she did take the opportunity to

express herself when she felt the need. And in seeing her brother again in such an unexpected manner, Hinata just couldn't help herself but show her affections and surprise by pulling the older boy into a sibling hug before quickly releasing him (and blushing of course due to all the stares focused on her) before going back and standing with her new teammates.

Shaking the surprised look off her face, Tsunade went back to what she wanted to say before. "Right. Let's get straight to the point, shall we? As you can all see, I got an unexpected visit from Jubei-san here." Pausing, Tsunade glared the still smiling boy sitting relaxingly on her couch sipping a cup of tea as if he belongs with the furniture in the room. "The purpose of Jubei-san's visit is to give me a special invitation." Holding up the scroll, Tsunade made a show of unrolling it in an effort to prolong the suspense. "This scroll is an invitation to the village of the Hidden Leaf, asking us if we wish to send participants to attend a special Chuunin Examination held – for the first time ever – in the Hidden Air Village."

There was no need for a pause as everyone immediately jumped up to shout his or her opinions on the matter. It took Tsunade slamming her hand down onto her desk (causing quite a dent as well) to silence everyone once again. "Quite! I'm not finished yet. Now. Unlike all other Chuunin Exams ever held, this one will be held and judged by the standards of the Air Ninjas. As such, it **will** be a lot harder than any other test you've ever endured. There will be deaths, injuries and even life-changing events. However, I can say with certainty that if you do pass each stage of the exams held, you will be rewarded nicely for your efforts. Why? Because the Kuunoki Ninjas aren't just offering you a place to compete, they are offering you a once in a lifetime opportunity to **learn** under them as their apprentices for a time. I will repeat - this exam will be very different from any other exam ever held, because other than the initial preliminary examination, you are all going to be judged on an individual status, rather than group work; and you will also be rewarded as individual."

This time, Tsunade paused slightly to let the news sink in before continuing on. "As such, due to the high mortality rate, I've selected 3 teams from Konoha to participate in the exam. Team Gai – consisting of members: Hyuuga Neji, Ten Ten and Rock Lee. Team Kurenai – consisting of members: Uchiha Sasuke, Hyuuga Hinata and Inuzuka Kiba. And Team Asuma – consisting of members: Yamanaka Ino, Akimichi Chouji and Aburame Shino. You have all been chosen to participate. However, you can decide to not go if you think you are not ready."

Giving them time to think, Tsunade focused her eyes directly on Sasuke. "Uchiha. It is VERY merciful of me to let you participate in this exam. Technically while serving your suspension, you shouldn't even be allowed to leave the village walls. However, as it is your goal to defeat a certain man in the future, you **will** need the skills that you could possibly learn from this once in a lifetime opportunity. Personally, I don't give a shit what happens to you, but the Konoha council would kill me if I purposely withdrew this opportunity from you and that I needed a strong Shinobi to pull your team through the preliminary test. Do you accept?"

Sasuke, having been silent through out the entire meeting, could only nod his head resolutely. He knew exactly how big a chance he's been given to prove himself to the eyes of the Hokage and to his teammates (of whom he's been getting along with just fine though Kiba would deny it to the furthest end). He knew that he had done much wrong in the past and was willing to prove his loyalty to his home once more; no matter what it took he would find a way to pass and make both the people of his home and his deceased parents proud of him, as well as finding an alternate way of killing Itachi.

"Okay, I don't expect an answer straight away. You can go and discuss it over with your teammates, your sensei's and your family. Remember, this may be a one-way trip to your deaths, or it is a once in a lifetime opportunity. For those of you who do not wish to go, I will rearrange those that do to fit into three man teams. As I've said before, other than the preliminary exam, everything else will be

judged on an individual basis, so how good your teamwork is doesn't really come into affect here. Now; out, all of you, except Sakura, Naruto and Shikamaru!" With that said, everyone except the aforementioned three Chuunins and Jiraiya slowly shuffled out the door while still deliberating about the new information.

Slumping slightly onto her seat, Tsunade gazed at the three Chuunins before her with a serious eye. "I asked the three of you to say because each of you have already been given an apprenticeship scholarship from certain members of the Hidden Air, and said members have asked that the three of you go there as soon as possible to start your training. Of course, like the others, you can refuse too."

"What! You mean we've already been accepted into the Kuunoki to be apprenticed to some of their Ninjas? Who would want us? And why? How the hell do they know about our skills? And what about..." Sakura's never ending list of questions was cut shorted suddenly when Shikamaru gave a huge sigh.

"How troublesome. Let me guess, Kaga-san has specifically asked for me and the Lady Oracle had specifically asked for Naruto's return, right?" He mumbled uninterestingly while Tsunade could only nod in answer, confirming that Shikamaru's suspicions were correct.

"But that still doesn't explain why they are interested in me?" Sakura continued.

"Actually. I suspect that it's because of me." Tsunade answered, only further confusing her apprentice (as Sakura had been under Tsunade's personal tutelage for the last few months). "You see, there was a time that I trained under a Kuunoki Shinobi as her apprentice many years ago. As such, she has taught me most of my basic and standard medical practices. And since I've taken you as my apprentice, I have taught you those same skills. But to further your true potential, you will need to practice and train in the Kuunoki. They have ways that I simply cannot imitate and they have practices that I cannot teach to another under oath. This is why the head of the

Dokudes family has been very kind in giving you this opportunity to learn what I had once learnt there. In the motherland of Medical Ninja art, the source of medical science."

Looking over to Jubei, Tsunade asked him directly. "Am I right?"

Jubei gave her a charming smile. "That's exactly what happened, Hokage-sama. Your intelligence astounds me."

Tsunade's eyebrow twitched again. "Don't taunt me, boy. Unless you want your jaw broken in." She threatened meaningfully. Jubei only raised a hand in silent surrender, though he didn't look very fearful.

"Anyway. You guys can decide on your own whether you accept this gracious invitation or not. But if you do, then you will have to leave with Jubei as with the rest of the Chuunin participants, but you won't be going through any trials, you'll just be transported to the Hidden Air village instantly. Any questions?" Tsunade finally concluded.

Shikamaru sighed again. "Not like they would take 'no' for an answer anyway. How troublesome. Anyway, I'll be ready in three days. How about you Naruto?"

Naruto narrowed his eyes slightly in thought, "I'd have to ask Iruka to look after Hana-chan for the duration that I'm away. I have a distinct feeling that Hinata will be participating and I don't want to leave Hana-chan all on her own. But other than that, I'll be ready in three days too." Smiling sarcastically at Shikamaru, Naruto followed up with: "And like you, my aunt doesn't take 'no' for an answer, ever."

Shifting her gaze from Naruto to Shikamaru and back, Sakura too made her decision. "I'd like to go too. As Tsunade-sensei said, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I would really like to visit the Hidden Air in my lifetime, if only once. I too, will be ready in three days time."

"Well, that's all good and well then. I'll see you all in three days. Bye!" Jubei jumped to his feet enthusiastically, waved at the fellow

Chuunins and two Sannins before disappearing away from the room.

Tsunade slumped further into her chair and suddenly, she had an impulsive need to state the following words: "How troublesome..."

Naruto and Sakura could only chuckle at Tsunade's words while this time; it was Shikamaru's eyebrows that twitched in irritation.

End.

(1) This character came from the Naruto Movie 1. I won't give a summary of what happened in the movie itself but basically, the snow country was overthrown some years ago, and the heir to the throne – Kazehana Koyuki went missing. Many years later, she returned but as Fujikaze Yukie, a famous actress and somehow regained her rightful throne. That's it, nothing else you really need to know. If anyone is interested in the movie though, you can download a scanlation summary of the manga from [here](#) or you can download the movie itself or (I think) it should also be out on DVD.

(2) The Hidden Star Village was introduced as part of the 'filler' Naruto episodes that are still currently being run on air. I won't go into detail too much about the story line, other than the fact that the story revolves around the character – Sumaru. The hidden Star village was named after the mysterious purple chakra-ed asteroid that fell from the sky onto the village many hundreds of years ago. The people at the time learnt to harness and absorb the violent chakra of the asteroid and developed many new and unique jutsus. However, the violent chakra causes many side-affects on the user's bodies, eventually killing them in the process. Suffice to say, a 'Sandaime' Hoshikage forbid the 'star' training for a period of ten years, before he was killed and his 'successor' reintroduced said 'star training.' Sumaru's parents (who supposedly died) somehow stole the 'star' (asteroid) from the village in order to stop the training, but Naruto and gang were employed to bring back said 'star'. Eventually, there were lots of fights leading to deaths, and the star

was 'destroyed' in the process. Sumaru was also left orphaned a second time, but for real this time.

(3) This is just the way Maya calls certain clans. Kaga comes from the 'Shadow Walker', as he can walk through shadows. The Nara clan are referred to as 'Shadow Casters', as they *use* Shadows. Yamanakas are called 'Mind Walker', since they walk through people's minds and control it. The Uzumakis' are referred to by the name 'Seers' as they can see both the past and the future. Maya's own clans (the Oniyoubu) are often referred to as the 'Speakers' or 'Spirit Summoners'. It's an archaic way of saying what the clan does with their abilities but also a way of showing your respect to these specialised clans.

(4) Yes, this is Sumaru for those of you who have watched up to episode 179 and up of the Naruto series.

(5) "Qwee" – pronounced as 'ku-wee' is a summoned animal belonging to Maya. As an Oniyoubu, she is able to 'speak' to animals and the spirits, as such; it's very easy for her to form summoning contracts with said animals or spirits. Maya is the only Gate Guardian with multiple summons under her belt.

(6) Eh... yeah. I never planned to give Maya two personalities, but once again, this story just developed on its own. Anyway, I hope it wasn't too confusing. I seem to have created a Hinata-Sakura hybrid in Maya. It's weird to me too, but it seems to work. I needed Maya to grow a backbone anyway and this solution fits well.

(7) Heh. SPOILER! There's a reason why the 7 High Councillors of the Kuunoki had been in existence for close to 300 years altogether. In fact, the first of the Councillors came into existence almost 1500 years ago and have since continued to exist until now. How is this possible? It's because the 7 High Councillors are made up of the 'dead' souls of the past Kuunoki Uzumaki leaders. They once lived as leaders of the Kuunoki a long time ago. And in their death, their souls have been sealed into this plan of existence to continue to survive through out all time. To refer to the 7 High councillors as the

'dead' is a very derogatory term by Yami, it is something that very few know and fear. After all, how can you kill something that is already dead and formless.

(8) Yes, I gave Kabuto a younger sister – around the same age as Naruto and gang. If you want to learn more about her, read the Chuunin Exam Participant's Character Profiles on my website. Link is on my ffnet profile's page.

(9) Kageru's clone number is actually '636', but since she was the only surviving clone of her generation of her batch (300 in all), she's just referred to as 'Zero', the first and only of her kind left, and worth just about as much as 'zero'. So sad. Again, if you want to know more about this mysterious Kageru, go to my Chuunin Exam Participant's Character Profiles page on my website. Link is on my ffnet profile's page.

(10) Again, for those interested in this OC, go to my Chuunin Exam Participant's Character Profiles page on my website. Link is on my ffnet profile's page.

(11) Tsunade speaks the truth having lived in the Hidden Air village for a time. It's a VERY small village that only has a population of around 300 to 500 people in total (including all the old, women and young). Add another 50 or so guests and you'll find it very difficult to cater for the extra people. Many things have to be considered for big events like the Chuunin exam. For example, you need to provide them with shelter, food and clothing. Not to mention the usage of local training sites and how to help them adapt to the new environment. It's a lot of work and a lot to ask for a village so small.

Hi all, I've only introduced 2 teams of OCs in this chapter. I'll be slowly going through them as time goes on. I won't dump them all on you guys because I know you're still getting use to the Gate Guardians themselves, let alone learn everything about the Examinees. Hope you all like this chapter so far. The next few will be about the trials and tribulations of the various teams, I think. Please remember to read and review!

Chuunin Exam 1st Phase I

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Two: Chuunin Exam - First Phase I

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ',
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: Yeah! Finally the fun stuff begins! There will be a lot of jump scenes, please bare with me. It's all in an attempt to inspire suspense.

This chapter will basically describe what each of the KONOHA genin teams have to go through in order to pass the first phase of the exam. I hope my creative rewriting of how they do things in this exam is entertaining or at least interesting. I would hate to find that some people don't like my way of testing them.

Another thing I have to add is that I will be developing the Canon Characters a bit more in these and following chapters, so don't be surprised if they turn out a bit OOC, it's all part of their own personal development. Anyway, hope you enjoy!

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 22

Three days later, it was confirmed that all the Genins specifically selected by Tsunade to take up the challenge of the Hidden Air Chuunin Exam had accepted the offer. Most of the villagers and Shinobi of the Leaf had also taken this opportunity to gather outside the village gates in an attempt to give these participants their best well wishes and see them off. Families hugged their children while others cheered. Eventually, the Anbu, Jounin, Chuunins and other Shinobi guards ushered the citizens away, leaving behind only the participants themselves, Tsunade, Jiraiya, Naruto, Shikamaru, Sakura and Jubei – their exam proctor.

"Okay, let's get the show on the way." Jubei twisted his head to the right and then the left, snapping some of his bones in place and relaxing his shoulder muscles in preparedness. "Godaime Hokage-sama, please unroll the same scroll I gave you previously and have all the participants sign their names on the last section of the scroll, after all the terms and conditions listed."

Following his request, Tsunade laid out the opened scroll upon the ground.

"Now, please sign your names with your own blood, in the order of your teams." Jubei continued his instructions and the Konoha Genins followed without interruption.

After Kiba, Hinata, and Sasuke signed the scroll, clouds of smoke erupted from the parchment in a startling explosion. Waving the smoke away, it was revealed that a smaller scroll was sitting atop the newly written names of team Kurenai.

Picking up the smaller scroll, Jubei threw it at Sasuke nonchalantly. "From the very moment you signed your names upon the main scroll, you have accepted all terms and conditions of the exam. Not only that, but straight after you sign - the exam has officially started for

you and your team. There may be deaths; there will be pain and struggle. Whether you survive or not is up to your skills as shinobi. This here..." Indicating the scroll in Sasuke's hand, Jubei continued. "...is a map of where the secret entrance to the Kuunoki is located. Your first task in this exam is to find your way to the Hidden Village in the Air. I will NOT be guiding you there. In fact, as an Examiner, I will be doing all I can to STOP you from getting to your destination. Is that understood?" Jubei looked closely at the faces of Sasuke, Kiba and Hinata. And though he could see a glint of worry and concern, he also saw that determination far outweighed any other emotion. "Good."

The other teams soon followed in team Kurenai's footsteps and before long, all the official signing and map distributions are over with. Sliding four small golden rings from his small finger and thumb, Jubei nonchalantly flicked them to the ground. A small burst of his Chakra later and rings have evolved into large, one and a half metre radius rings standing vertically in front of the three Chuunin participating teams, and one in front of Naruto, Sakura and Shikamaru (who were standing by the side).

"Here are the rules, so listen up people. When you step through my rings, your actual examination will have begun. I will be transporting you and your teams to three different locations within the fire country, each an equal distance from the Hidden Air village. Your task is to find out where the hell I've dumped you and then to find your way to the Kuunoki Village gates. In between those times however, I will be popping up now and again to test you; laying out intricate traps in order to stop you. I may even manipulate enemies to slow you down or even attempt to kill you. All in all, you have two weeks to get all members of your team to the gates of the Hidden Air Village. If you die or get injured during this phase, you are on your own. I will NOT help you or save you under any circumstances. If you are unable to make it to the Village under your own power by the end of the time limit, you are automatically disqualified and will be refused entry to the village. Of course, you will have to make your own way home. During ANY time within this first phase, YOU CAN QUIT and return

to your village – that will also lead to an automatic disqualification for yourself and your team. Anything unclear?"

Sasuke raised his hand. Jubei nodded in his direction and Sasuke immediately followed with his question. "If one of the team members wishes to quit and the others don't, what will happen?"

"The entire team is disqualified." Jubei answered instantly.

This time Neji raised his hand. Again, Jubei nodded and Neji spoke. "Will there be any fights between participating teams?"

Jubei shrugged. "That is all up to you and your team. I will not purposely put two teams on a collision course in order to fight each other. However, you may decide to cut down the number of opponents for the later stages and specifically target other exam participants. I won't stop you and I really wouldn't care."

Tenten raised her hand and the process repeated itself. "How will we be able to tell the other examinees from other villages?"

Jubei smirked cruelly. "You won't. As I said, I will not purposely pit teams against teams. However, if that does happen then I guess it's just your bad luck. You're going to have to treat this as if the entire world is against you and you have to make it within a certain time limit. Everyone is an enemy and everything may well be an obstacle."

Chouji raised his hand timidly this time. "What if we can't find the entrance to the village?" He asked hesitantly.

Again, Jubei shrugged nonchalantly. "Tough luck. This is a **HIDDEN** Shinobi village so it's bound to be hard to find. You're just going to have to trust your sense of direction and the map I've given you. Any more questions?"

Shikamaru raised his hand this time and even though he was not a participant, he was still curious. "From what you've described of the

rules in this first phase of the exam, there is a probability that every team that enters may well pass."

Jubei nodded. "True, but on the other hand, we could have every single team that enters this exam fail and no one will pass to the second round. It all depends of whether or not they can go through all of the traps and obstacles set up by us – the Exam proctors - and still make it on time to the gates." Jubei smile turned into a smirk. "I can assure you I won't make it easy."

Shikamaru shuddered nervously, glad that he was already a Chuunin and didn't have to go through all this. However, he was still worried about Chouji and Ino though. Without his presence as the strategist of the team, he wasn't so sure that they could make it. However, they did have Shino, and Shino's always been rather good at finding things and surviving in a harsh environment. All he could really do is pray and hope they make it safe and sound.

"If that's all, then please step through the portals before you and we can finally start the fun." Jubei taunted, but all the participating Genins ignored his jibe and stepped through the portals one at a time – each disappearing into the abyss before them. Eventually, all that was left was Tsunade, Jiraiya, Naruto, Shikamaru, Sakura and Jubei.

Snapping the three ring-portals closed and returning them to their rightful size, shape and place upon his fingers, Jubei refocussed his attention to the people who are still present. "Well, let's get the three of you directly to the Kuunoki, shall we? We don't need to go through all the stuff that the others are going through since you've all already been invited and accepted."

Naruto nodded and was the first to step through the remaining opened portal without a glance back or showing any concern to the others. After all, to him, it was almost like returning home. Muttering a quiet 'troublesome' beneath his breath, Shikamaru followed Naruto, sluggishly walking through the portal. Last to follow was

Sakura who glanced back one final time at Tsunade – her teacher, before hesitatingly passing through the portal before her.

As soon as Sakura's pink hair disappeared into the portal, Jubei's smiling visage disappeared and he turned to look at Tsunade and Jiraiya very seriously. "The Lady asked me to warn you just before I go. Be very wary of a certain Danzo-san and the 'ROOTS' organisation. Not only that, you still has a spy in your midst that works for Orochimaru. You will have to get rid of him soon." And with that said, Jubei too, stepped through the portal. An instant later, the portal itself disappeared along with its master.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx **(Kiba, Hinata and Sasuke)**

SPLASH!

"Yuck! What the hell did we land in?" Kiba cried as he found himself in waist-deep mud. Akamaru whined in protest as well, since the small dog had accidentally fell off Kiba's head as he landed, leaving his once pristine white fur an ugly, muddy brown colour.

The sticky, brownish liquid-soil swallowed Kiba's shoes and pants completely the instant he'd dropped into the irritating substance, leaving behind a very uncomfortable squishy-wiggling feeling. Twisting as best he could in the constricting substance, Kiba turned around only to see his teammates in the same predicament. Both Sasuke and Hinata had found themselves caught in the almost immovable mud bath clinging to all their body parts, irritating their skins as well as making them very uncomfortable.

Looking over their surrounding, the muddy landscape seems to stretch forever until it disappeared into a sea of mist. Singular, dead tree branches and stumps can be found now and again, but other than that, the area looked deserted of life or foliage. No trees, no leaves, no animals, just lots and lots of mud and mist.

"Where the hell are we?" Kiba muttered to himself. Although the boy was probably the most knowledgeable of the landscape in Fire

Country in their team, even he was stumped as to exactly where they were. "That scumbag - Jubei really couldn't have found a worst possible place to dump us, couldn't he?" Muttering to himself, he gave out a large Shikamaru-ish sigh. "Well, at least nothing else could go wrong, right?" As if challenged by his words, the heavens above rumbled in deep thunder and soon, the sky darkened and poured down a river of rain.

Sasuke's irritating glare towards the mud that constricted him now turned its entire focus towards the seemingly wet and whimpering Inuzuka and pet dog, as if completely blaming the boy for their predicament. "You and your big mouth, dog breath." He growled lowly in anger.

"Ano... Now is not a good time to fight, we should look for a way to get out of this mud and find some shelter." Hinata tried to bring their focus back to the situation at hand and succeeded to some extent. Not exactly enjoying their mud-covered dilemma, both boys decided to follow in her lead. However, this was easier said than done.

Lifting one foot, they all found it extremely hard to go against the pull of the clinging mud and when they stepped forward, they squished and swirled the mud around them, splattering themselves with more muck. After walking around for three or so minutes in no particular direction with the thundering rain pouring down on top of them, the team discovered they had probably only made a few metres of progress.

Eyebrow twitching, Kiba finally gave in and yelled in frustration. "WHAT THE FXXK! At the rate we're going, we're never going to get anywhere!" The now mud-covered Akamaru wined in agreement on Kiba's shoulders. The boy was upset at being covered in filth and at having Akamaru's muddy form inside his jacket, the only thing previously keeping him warm, dry and clean. All of which isn't making much of a difference under the torrential rain.

"SHUT UP! I don't see you having any better idea!" Sasuke growled, his temper having reached his limit long before now.

"Why the hell should I? You Uchi-FREAK!" Kiba counted, needing something or someone to vent his anger.

"At least I'm not the one who can only complain and do nothing, you useless piece of dog meat!" Sasuke cruelly snapped.

Eyes narrowing in fury, Kiba roared. "You take that back, you TRAITOR!"

"ENOUGH!" Exerting a discharge of Chakra from both her palms, Hinata somehow blasted both Kiba and Sasuke in opposite directions, pushing the mud aside as they were forced through. Both boys somehow managed to trip upon their own feet due to the force of the chakra blast and ended up sitting down, neck deep in the overflowing mud.

"Now is NOT the time for the two of you to argue. We are NINJAS! Not spoilt little children. We are also currently participating in the CHUUNIN EXAM, who knows whether or not Jubei-nisama is already watching us and marking down our scores. Do you want to be humiliated by your own behaviour? Do you want to FAIL?

BECAUSE I DON'T! " Huffing due to the exertion, Hinata had also finally reached her limit.

The usually shy and timid Hyuuga usually dislikes any confrontation between her two teammates, but when they are truly acting so immature towards one another, especially during such an important time, even her everlasting patience can dwindle. "Now, let's just focus our efforts on getting out of here." Her now calmer voice could hardly be heard over the still pouring rain, but both boys understood her need to work together and get out of here first. Glaring at one another, Sasuke and Kiba came to a truce for the moment being; they'll bicker it out another day, another time but not now.

Struggling to his feet, Sasuke glared at his now completely filthy shirt before a sudden idea struck his head. */ I am such an IDIOT! /* Mentally slapping himself on his forehead in stupidity, Sasuke confronted his other two teammates. "I know how we can get out of

here. Do the two of you know the tree walking exercise?" Both Genins nodded their heads. "Then we could probably do the Water-walking exercise, which is just a higher form of Chakra control." Explaining what needs to be done to his two teammates, Sasuke demonstrated the move by focusing his own Chakra to the soles of his feet, slowly rising himself above the mud bath.

Once done with the demonstration, he continued to coach his teammates until they could both do it with relative ease. Hinata had found the exercise easy to perform, having been trained in perfect chakra control all her life. Not to mention, training to become a medic-nin was far more difficult than this simple exercise. As for Kiba, the Inuzuka had found the exercise difficult to begin with but with encourage from both Hinata and surprisingly Sasuke, he eventually got the concept and practice of the exercise down.

Finally finding themselves out of the mud, all three Genins rushed towards a chosen direction, their feet tapping and splashing among the liquid-brown mud beneath them but never allowing themselves to get stuck in the substance again. Passing through the wavering mist and still pouring rain, team Kurenai continued on in their path, focused on one singular goal for the moment – finding a suitable shelter. Everything else could wait; for now, shelter from the rain comes first.

Eventually, they came upon wet grassland of sorts, with a few larger and stronger trees stationed every few metres from one another. The mud dissipated slightly, the land covered in a mass of sea green, tall grasses living and growing from the fresh water beneath them. The team ignored the grass and they ignored the rain, minds focused completely on their task. Selecting one of the larger trees as an appropriate shelter, all three Genins silently climbed up the tree and settled down upon three large branches under the foliage. Sighing in exhaustion and relief for being out of the rain, all three genins nodded in agreement that they would deal with everything else tomorrow or whenever the rain ceased. They were just too hungry,

tired, wet, cold, and miserable at the moment to find motivation to do anything but sit and wait.

And so, they sat and they waited. The rain continued to pour all day, and perhaps all night – the team wasn't sure as they couldn't pinpoint the sun or moon from the almost pitch black, cloudy sky. They sat and they waited some more. Kiba huddled with Akamaru, preserving whatever warmth was shared between the two and ignored the now dry and itching mud stuck upon their skins and furs. Hinata, as the only medic nin in their group, practiced her Chakra control exercises in order to generate heat within her own body, something all Medic ninjas have to learn – controlling one's own body temperature. Sasuke, having an affinity for fire jutsus, practiced creating small fireballs within the palms of his hands and concentrating the heat to spread through out his body. Overall, it was a very miserable start to their exam, and the three Genins (plus dog) couldn't wait to pass this stage as soon as possible, if only they didn't have to wait two weeks.

At last, daybreak and the sun could be seen rising above the clouds once more. The smiling vision before them brought the three Genins (plus dog) hope and an unmistakable relief to know that they had not been transported to a place with no sun.

"Okay, now that we finally have some light, let's have a look at where we are on the map and where we need to go." Sasuke immediately launched into his leadership role without question. He pulled out the scroll Jubei had given him just yesterday, even though it had felt like eons ago. Preparing to unroll the scroll while both Hinata and Kiba sat beside him excitedly, even Sasuke couldn't keep the anticipation to himself. Gripping the opening end of the scroll, Sasuke quickly ripped it open to reveal...

A blank page.

There was an awkward pause in silence, until... "WHAT THE FXXK?" Kiba cried out in shock and outrage.

Not quite believing what was before his eyes, Sasuke quickly unrolled a bit more of the scroll only to find the entire scroll to be EMPTY of words or pictures, completely blank. "I don't believe this..." He muttered to himself unbelievably. "No fxxking way..." He murmured almost despairingly while Kiba continued to rant quite loudly in the background.

Not entirely convinced that they've been deceived by her brother, Hinata stayed calm and focussed, tentatively removing the blank scroll from Sasuke's limp hands before looking at it more closely. / *There's something wrong here, something we're missing completely.* / And with that thought in mind, she activated her Byakugan only to discover that the scroll had minute rivers of Chakra embedded inside it that the normal eyes can't see. Hinata smiled in appreciation of her brother going to such lengths in order to test their intelligence and skills. "I see. The scroll isn't exactly blank, per se." She commented almost nonchalantly, immediately silencing Kiba's rant and giving Sasuke some hope.

"There's Chakra embedded into this scroll and a weird seal on it as well. Jubei-nisama is not only testing our abilities in seeing underneath the underneath, but he's also testing our understanding of seals. Sasuke-kun, could you please activate your Sharingan as well and we'll compare our knowledge in order to decipher how to break this seal." Having finished explaining, Hinata continued to look at the opened scroll, knowing that her teammate would be following in her footsteps almost immediately.

Looking at the scroll's surface, Hinata could see intricate thin lines of chakra circling upon each other creating a mass of lines that looked more like a spider's web than anything else. In the centre of the Chakra-web structure was a hidden character that Hinata couldn't quite see. It wasn't that the word was invisible or anything, but the character's edges bled into its surrounding Chakra lines, making it difficult for Hinata to see exactly which parts were part of the character itself and which wasn't. Growing slightly frustrated after a few minutes of looking, Hinata was suddenly brought out of her

musings when Sasuke answered her silent question. "Blood. That's what the character in the middle says. It needs blood to activate."

Glad to finally have something to do, Kiba quickly bit on to his thumb using his sharp fangs, and dropped several droplets of blood onto the scroll. But nothing happened. Frowning in concentration, Sasuke's Sharingan watch in silent amazement as the blood interacted with the web of chakra, mixing and bleeding into one another. But strangely enough, the blood only mixed with one-third section of the web structure before stopping. Understanding the silent message, the last Uchiha quickly explained what he thought would break the seal. "Each of us have to draw blood in order to destroy the seal completely. Kiba's blood had dissolved one third of the seal's structure, but until the other two are damaged, we won't be able to see what's behind it." Quickly following in their team-mate's footsteps, both Sasuke and Hinata cut their thumbs with kunais and dropped a few droplets of their own blood into the now blood stained scroll.

The reaction was immediate. The blank scroll shimmered slightly and an image was revealed upon its once pristine white pages. However, unlike most maps which are flat and shows a top view of the region, the image presented on this scroll lifted itself and formed a three-dimensional, accurate, holographic representation of the Hidden Air Village. Eyes widening at the amazing effect of this scroll, the Genins were spell bound at the image being presented. There was an incredibly tall mountain with icy white capes surrounded by a whole row of mountain ranges on all sides. Upon its very tip, the young teens could see tiny buildings, bridges, roads and even the village gates represented in a compressed area where there was no ice or snow. In fact, the hidden village of the Air looked rather homey, and warm with its green leafy trees, crystal clear rivers and bountiful farmlands. It was small, much smaller than Konoha, but still a breathtaking site. Soon, fake three-dimensional clouds and mist floated into the scenery obscuring the once visible village hidden on the highest peak of one of the highest mountains in the air; and the Genins all released a collective breath of amazement. The image of

the mountains shrank slowly, converging onto the centre of the page. Soon, other countries could be seen, corresponding to some of the more famous villages, all surrounding the Hidden Air Mountain range. The Genins could see Fire country in all of its greenish glory, the Wind country showing a majority of brown sand, the Lightning country (being the closest country to the Hidden Air Village) on a plateau of high mountains full of ice and snow, the Earth country with its dry rocky formations and even the Water country (the furthest country away from the Air village) far in the corner of the page. The Konoha Genins continued to stare in wonder at the beauty and magic of the three-dimensional holographic map; it was certainly something they had never before seen or thought possible.

The first to get over their own astonishment was, surprisingly, Akamaru, who barked loudly to get his master's attentions. "Oh right, sorry. Guys, Akamaru says that we should find out where we are now so that we can finally get to where we're suppose to be." Nodding in acceptance, all three Genins focused once again on the map. Unfortunately, they had no idea where Jubei had dumped them simply looking at the sceneries upon the hologram. "Where the hell are we?" Kiba muttered under his breath, capturing the thoughts of his teammates perfectly.

Sasuke gave the boy a glare. "Don't you know? You're the one who's most familiar with the regions within Fire Country, always going on walks with your dog. And Jubei did say that he was going to drop us off somewhere in Fire Country." He countered quite logically, if only a little snappish.

Kiba reddened in embarrassment before snapping back. "I've never been to this area nor have I ever seen it before. I didn't even know that Fire Country has a swampy area to begin with. And..."

"Enough!" Hinata called out once again, getting quite tired of being the peacemaker. "Look, let's just study our surrounding and think about where Jubei-nisama may have dropped us off. If he says we're still in Fire Country, then we're definitely STILL in Fire Country."

Nodding dumbly towards Hinata's unpredictable temper, Kiba couldn't help but sniff the air in front of him for a bit before frowning. "The air is wet. Has been for a very long time. That's why there are so many dead trees and stuff, their roots rot due to all this wet wheather. Heh. I guess too much water is a bad thing as well." Akamaru barked in agreement with its master.

Looking over at the hateful mud and water beneath the tree they sat upon, Sasuke mumbled almost unconsciously. "This entire area is filled with mud and dirty water. The heart of Fire Country is all green forest and dry soil, filled with wildlife. All I see here is insects, slugs and maybe a few frogs." He glared at the wiggling black forms living in the muddy water before him.

Hinata blinked as she suddenly put things into perspective. "Kiba-kun, Sasuke-kun. Which countries border Fire Country?"

Sasuke blinked. "Well, there's the Rice Country with the Hidden Sound to the north of Fire Country, as well as the Lightning Country... and Rock Country."

"There's lots of small countries to the west, like Bird Country and Tea Country and such." Kiba continued.

"Yes, but is there a country that has lots and lots of water that borders Fire Country?" Hinata asked tentatively.

"There's the Hidden Waterfall and the Hidden... RAIN!" Kiba cried out in sudden excitement, having finally figured out where the hell they were. "We're in the borders of Fire Country and Rain Country! That's why it's so freaking wet!"

Focusing all their attentions back on the discarded map and hologram image, they easily tracked an approximate location of where they were currently located and calculate which direction they have to head towards in order to reach the Hidden Air village. "If what this map says is true, then we should head towards the North-West direction in order to reach Kuunoki." Decision made, Sasuke

rolled up the scroll and packed it safely away. "Let's go." Smirking in confidence once more, Sasuke jumped off the tree they had been residing in, bounced off the stagnant mud beneath his feet heading towards the North western direction (of which they could tell by studying the position of the sun now easily seen upon the clear blue sky). Kiba and Hinata followed him with all the enthusiasm in the world, with Akamaru barking along in happiness.

After travelling for a several hours, the team found another large tree to rest in for a few minutes. They grabbed some of the care packages they had packed before hand to eat, drank a few mouthfuls of clean water, and were off once again. Unfortunately, they still hadn't found a source of clean to clean themselves, so they would just have to live with their dirty clothes for now.

Regrettably, their current run of good luck suddenly ended. A shift in movement on the edge of Sasuke's vision was all the warning the team had before they were suddenly attacked by three huge, grey wolves. Reacting in instinct, all three Genins instantly jumped away from the tree, landing lightly upon the wet ground, the three looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of their enemy before the creatures disappeared. What was left of the tree once the creatures were gone wasn't a pretty sight; it was mauled to a small stump within the split second attack – demonstrating the mighty power and strength behind the initial assault.

The creatures were definitely wolves of some sort, but they were much larger – two metres tall in full height and three and a half metres long, their coats were of a misty grey colour. Their eyes were wild and brilliant green, reflecting the depths of a thick forest. And the effortless way these creatures disappear into thin air too - was abnormal. Unlike ninjas who used distractions like smoke in order to hide their escape; these creatures simply disappear into the background, slowly fading away into the surrounding smoothly.

Quickly activating his Sharingan, Sasuke caught another glimpse of the giant wolves before calling out a warning to his teammates,

barely giving them enough time to dodge another blow from the creatures. Landing again, Sasuke glared at the three mysterious foes with his red eyes. What he saw amazed him.

"These aren't normal animals by any means." He understated numbly.

Sniffing his opponents, Kiba gave a sarcastic snort in reply. "What ever gave you that idea? Is it their smoky fur coats that seem to shimmer whenever they move; or is it because they're bloody well standing on top of the water like they have perfect Chakra control - something that only humans, and animal summons can do!"

"They have their own intricate Chakra circulatory system." Hinata confirmed from her Byakugan eyes. "I think they are summoned creatures, or at least some sort of spirit being. They aren't completely *physical*. They have an abundance of spirit energy and very little physical energy, meaning that though they can use Chakra, they don't use it the way people do – by creating jutsus to mould the Chakra into doing what we want them to." Hinata quickly analysed, using all the knowledge she had learnt from reading all of the books in Naruto's small home Library as well as all the background information she had learnt during her Medical Ninja training.

"Hey! I remember Shikamaru saying he had met something like that before - a summoned 'spirit' creature instead of a normal animal summon. (1)" Kiba suddenly remembered. "He was fighting that (2) of the Sound Four or Five. He says it was damn hard tricking that woman to release her summons because that was the only way he could defeat them. What was he said again..." Taking a moment to remember, Kiba snapped his fingers as the memories came back. "It's impossible to hurt them physically, but you have to somehow manipulate them with special Chakra manifestation similar to their own in order to fight them." He muttered excitedly, mentally patting himself for remembering such an important quote.

Sasuke only glared on fiercely. "Right. As if any of us can use special 'Chakra manifestations'. We're nothing but sitting ducks out here."

"Indeed, I agree." Hinata muttered grimly and seriously, completely ruining Kiba's mood. "We are too open out here, our best chance is to head towards familiar ground."

"Right. Let's go." In a stunning show of teamwork and speed, all three genins turned around and ran.

"Man! This is SO not good for my reputation. I don't run from anything!" Kiba complained even while he continued running. Akamaru barked in agreement, hanging on for dear life to Kiba's hood.

"Kiba-kun! Watch out. Dodge to your left!" The warning from Hinata (with her Byakugan engaged) gave Kiba just enough time to avoid the jaws of one of the giant wolves who just appeared out of thin air right in front of the boy. Taking this advantage and kicking the wolf's face away, Kiba used the momentum to summersault over the disorientated beast, landed on his feet, and started running again.

"Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!" Sasuke called out as he blew off a giant fireball towards another beast standing in the team's way. The fireball disbursed a lot of the moisture in the air and ground, but the giant wolf before them just seems to shimmer away in a wave of smoke. "Shxt! They're fast!"

"Stop thinking of them as physical beings that need muscles to move! They're spiritual in nature! They can disappear and reappear like smoke in the air! Use all your senses and focus on any flairs of Chakra around you. That's the only warning you have before they reappear again." Hinata successfully analysed in a split second as she watched for all three beast's movements with her 360-degree eye sight.

The others following her order, either activated their Sharingan or heightened their sense of smell with Chakra, actively seeking any flairs of Chakra suddenly appearing around them. This time around, the team successfully avoided a few more attempts by the giant beasts that wanted nothing less than biting a limb off of their bodies.

However, soon, all three beasts disappeared from their radar as the team got closer and closer to the familiar forests of Konoha.

Abruptly, Hinata called a halt to their movements. "They're gone, I can't see them anywhere. Something must be up." Just as the words left her mouth, all three genins could feel a small vibration beneath their feet. The Genins leapt up immediately; only to be followed by a bursting of the soft soiled ground beneath them, revealing the three large wolves. Each of the wolves had their jaws wide open; ready to take a bite out of their prey. Reacting to instinct, each member of team Kurenai took up a fighting stance.

Sasuke automatically threw several kunais and shuriken at his opponent - all of which were dodged or avoided. With his Sharingan still activated and the three commas providing him information about the beast's probable future actions, Sasuke deftly twisted away from its dangerous claws and mouth. Landing and jumping backwards, creating more distance between the creature and himself, he threw a few more shurikens, this time with strings attached to them. Quickly forming another familiar seal, Sasuke called his attack. "Katon: Housenka no Jutsu!"

Blasting out a series of smaller fireballs, Sasuke engaged the beast in a cat and mouse game, lengthening the distance between them and then shortening it again. At the same time, he expertly manoeuvred the shurikens hidden behind his fire attack with invisible metal strings. Once he had positioned himself and his opponent in the perfect position to attack, Sasuke turned around in mid-jump and followed up by retracting the strings, resulting in the shurikens flying in a circle surrounding the beast. Pulling the string even tighter, Sasuke effectively trapped the beast.

Not waiting for the creature to recover itself and disappear once again, Sasuke summoned his best Fire technique. "Katon: Ryuuka no Jutsu" Producing a high-density torch of flames directly at the beast, Sasuke effectively smouldered the being with high intensity Chakra. A sudden burst of common smoke from where his flames

impacted the beast indicated to Sasuke that he had finally succeeded in dissipating the summoned creature. When the flames finally cleared, all that was left of was a very charred surface.

Having resorted to his most powerful attack, Kiba and Akamaru had merged to form the ultimate beast – Soutourou (doubled headed wolf). And although Akamaru had not been given the opportunity to perform dynamic marking on the mysterious shadow-ish wolves as their opponents, with the clear landscape to their advantage, Kiba was sure that they would eventually land an attack on one of the beasts soon enough, with or without aiming for it. Another advantage of using this form instead of their normal Juunin Bunshin is that with Akamaru and Kiba morphed into one being, Akamaru can actively attack this time instead of relying solely on his master due to the fact that the miniature dog still hadn't mastered walking on water with chakra yet.

Performing a long sequence of Garouga (double headed fang), Kiba and Akamaru were extremely lucky that they managed to catch their prey off guard, resulting in a head-on impact, tunnelling and slashing their way through the form of the shadow beast, ripping it apart. The beast roared in painful terror as it was shredded by Kiba and Akamaru's technique, a sudden explosion of smoke later revealed that the summoned creature had finally disappeared from the clearing, leaving Kiba and Akamaru victorious in their fight, if only very tired from their ordeal.

Knocking her opponent away with a well-placed Kaiten (Heavenly spin), Hinata gave herself some time to think up a new strategy. She soon brought her spinning to a graceful stop, Byakugan activated and ready to analyse all the strengths and weaknesses of the last remaining summoned beast. Though she knew she could probably disrupt its internal energy flow with a powerful blast of Jyuuken, Hinata realised that it would be too great a risk for her to get close enough in order to perform such a move, without having the risk of

the beast disappearing from her sight and reappearing somewhere else.

Luckily for her, her teammates (having already finished with their own opponents) decided to come and help her instead. A blast of Gogakyu no Jutsu (grand fireball technique) by Sasuke, made the beast dodge to the left, only to encounter Kiba and Akamaru – still in Soutourou (Double Headed Wolf) form and their attack – Garouga (Double Headed Fang). Jumping straight up in order to avoid the dangerous spinning assault from it's doubled headed cousin, the beast's concentration was completely focused on both of the two threats, ultimately forgetting its original prey. Hinata having snuck up close from behind the beast while he jumped upwards in order to avoid Kiba and Akamaru, readied herself to attack the beast during its landing while its concentration was on her teammates. With a confident yell of triumph, Hinata struck vertically up onto the vulnerable belly of the giant, grey wolf as it landed on top of her. The results were instant; the wolf disappeared into smoke, leaving Hinata breathing heavily trying to catch her breath.

"Thanks guys." She announced gracefully as both boys settled down from their adrenaline high – Sasuke having turned off the chakra consuming Sharingan; Kiba and Akamaru having finally returned into their normal forms. After a minute of catching their breaths and stabilising themselves, Hinata called out to the boys. "Let's go. We don't want to wait for a second attack."

Nodding in agreement, all three genins set off towards their original destination again, this time keeping a constant vigil on their surrounding just in case another enemy pops out of nowhere, all of them were unwilling to be taken by surprise for a second time.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx **(Lee, Tenten and Neji)**

CRASH!

"Ow... Get. Off. Me." Neji grunted out in pain as he felt his entire chest cave in due to the combined weight of his teammates landing

directly on top of him, who in returned, landed on top of a rickety wooden table. Unfortunately, the table couldn't handle their combined weight either; the wooden structure splintered and collapsed less than a second later (pulling Neji, Tenten and Lee with it) onto the unhygienic floorboard beneath them. Wheezing in agony, Neji tried his best not to breathe in the stinky smoke and dust that had filtered through out the room due to their unexpected arrival.

"Lee! Get off! You and your weights are CRUSHING US!" Somehow, Tenten still managed to yell even with her lung capacity crushed as it was.

"Sorry!" Lee muttered nervously and jumped off his comrade's backs, literally. Straightening himself out, he helpfully reached forward, grabbed onto Tenten's arms and pulled (arm, body and all) up and off his rival, only to be punched in the face by Tenten's other fist, screaming at him to not pull her arm so hard that he almost dislocated her shoulder.

Ignoring his teammate's hand or support, Neji somehow managed to push himself up and into a standing position, if only through will alone. */ Oh my back! Now I know what it feels like to be old, arthritis is a going to be a BXTCH!* / Neji thought sarcastically to himself, never allowing his inner ramblings reach the surface. After all, he was a Hyuuga, the Hyuuga heir in fact, and he had a reputation to maintain, no matter how hard this task has become recently.

Grinding his teeth together, Neji forcefully suppressed his rising ire. */ Now is not the time to kill Lee and Tenten, I need them to pass this stage of the exam. I must repress my urge to murder, repress! / (3)*

"Oi! You broke our table and disrupted my game. I was about to win with a royal flush! Now, you're gonna pay the price, kiddies!" A gruff voice rang out from the behind the team of Genins. Tensing at the suppressed anger in the tone of the voice, Neji, Tenten and Lee all turned around to look directly at the face of an infuriated, tall muscle man with a large scar diagonally across his face. The man had darker skin to the Konoha genins and he had his chest exposed,

only wearing an unzipped, sleeveless jacket and Shinobi pants with sandals. Tied slanting across his forehead is a head protector with the symbol for the Hidden Village of Rain carved onto it; not only that, but there was a horizontal line crossed over the village symbol accompanying the head protector. All three Genins gulped nervously at sighting the Missing Nin status of their opponents.

"I think it'll be fun punching the lights out of these shrimps. That'll teach them for interrupting our important game, yeah? What's you say boys and gals?" A deep voice grunted in amusement from the other side of the group.

That's when Neji finally realised where their team have landed on exactly. It was a bar of sorts with round tables stationed randomly around the wooden room. Wooden chairs, tables, bottles of alcohol and various shapes and sizes of glasses and cups arranged upon the tables supported the idea of a bar; scattered remains of card games, dices and a pool table by the side of the room indicated that the place doubles as a gambling den as well. But what was most noteworthy in the entire room were its inhabitants – all of whom were fierce looking men of various shapes and sizes, each with a slashed headband located somewhere upon their body and each with a dangerous number of weapons all held in their hands or teeth, ready for some action.

/ Well, shxt! We landed in the middle of a Missing Nin haven. Jubei-sama couldn't have taken us to a more hostile place to start to our journey, could he? / Neji thought sarcastically to himself.

A sudden fierce yell erupted from somewhere in the room and all the Missing Nins charged at the reluctant Genins, and so the fun began.

"Why are you playing with them?" Maya asked quietly, leaning slightly over her sempai in order to watch the upcoming events happening to Team Gai through a ring-portal created by Jubei. "You could have pulled a lot more dangerous stunts than just this."

Jubei gave the girl a small chuckle. "And miss seeing their faces? Hah." Pausing to give off another chuckle, Jubei decided to explain himself a little bit more. "I already know what these Konoha teams are capable of. And truthfully, if you're talking about physical skills and abilities, they are already Chuunin material."

Ignoring the shocked expression upon Maya's eyes (as that is the only part of her face you can literally see), Jubei continued jovially in his explanations. "And not to mention, they will become very useful pieces for Ruri-sama's plans in the future. That's one of the reasons why I'm not pushing them as much as I would have with other teams."

Lifting both his middle finger and index finger to form the universal sign of 'two', Jubei started his second point of reasoning. "Another reason is that I want to test their determination, patience and persistence. They all know how powerful I am, and they know that I'm only playing with them since I haven't really sent any powerful people against them or made their lives that much harder. This will frustrate them, and make them inclined to fight one another. Only those who persistently fight for what they want, consistently remember what their ultimate goal is, and still remain close teammates are worthy to enter our exam. That's what I think. And the last reason for doing this is... because I want to." With a final grin, Jubei went back to watching the entertainment ensue.

Performing a spinning kick at one of his opponents, Lee called out passionately: "Konoha Senpuu!" Smashing his weighted feet against the large man's vulnerable face, the impact sent the man flying away, knocking into another opponent in his path. No time to take a break, Lee immediately dodged several kunais that flew at him from another angle, jumping and bouncing off the surface of one of the still standing walls of the building, Lee sent another kick towards the face of another Missing Nin, before twisting in mid air and smashing his fist into the face of a fourth member of the gang.

"Hmm. Most of these guys have only Academy or Genin standard abilities, and the rest are mainly Chuunin standards. I can't see any of them having Jounin abilities!" Lee called out to his teammates with a slightly disappointed tone of voice, unknowingly insulting the pride of his enemies directly in front of them. However, what Lee said was true enough. Most of the Missing Nins located here are only of Genin standards. They were all once bandits or mercenaries that joined various Ninja villages for a short period of time, training in the ninja arts, before finally realising they just weren't cut out for that profession, and therefore leaving the village behind with no regrets. As they were all low ranking missing Nins with very limited knowledge of the Village's secrets, their names were never listed in the Bingo book. After all, who would be interested in hunting down these minor criminals?

Offended or not, more burly men surged onto Lee, thinking that they could corner the boy and therefore smash him into the ground with their numbers. Unfortunately for them, Lee only thought of the situation as a 'target rich' opportunity. Although there just wasn't enough space for Lee to manoeuvre himself in order to perform his more powerful moves, he was still fast and strong enough to avoid most of the damage, while dishing out his own attacks efficiently and effectively.

Having noticed the commotion coming from inside the bar, more and more people surged into the dilapidating place through the now broken doors. Some managed to catch a sight of the three Genins and immediately started advancing towards them. Other simply joined in the supposedly random and chaotic fights, hitting one another in order to start their own battles for seemingly no reason at all.

Furnitures of all variety had been wrecked beyond repair; pillars and walls had been smashed upon, creating human sized holes in certain areas. Shattered glass littered the once oily but relatively clean wooden floorboards and all the windows in the room had been

ruined due to the infighting. Basically, what had begun as a small incident had rapidly become a brawl of unprecedented proportions.

Unable to use any of her mass weapon attacks due to the low ceiling, Tenten had been forced to use specific, one-on-one battle weapons in order to counter the growing number of enemies facing her. Luckily for her, she was just adept at using a single metallic staff as she was with throwing kunais and shuriken. Being possibly the only female in the entire room, most of the weaker and cowardly enemy Ninjas had chosen to engage her.

Spinning the staff around, Tenten successfully deflected several kunais thrown at her, snapping the staff forward - she pulled and pushed it with all her strength, slamming it into the stomach of one of her opponents. Surging her chosen weapon with chakra and strengthening her stance, Tenten ploughed forward again, slamming her staff (and single enemy caught up with the staff) into another opponent and then another opponent, all three piling on top of one another tilting precariously due to the staff's design and the strength behind Tenten's initial impact. Stomping her foot hard onto the ground, Tenten suddenly spun in a Chakra enhanced twist not unlike the Kaiten but with much less defensive influence. The speed and velocity of the spin however was strong enough to swing the three dangling opponents off the staff, smashing against one of the supporting pillars destroying it completely due to the three men's combined weight.

Thumping the staff vertically straight onto the ground, Tenten jumped. With her hands tightly controlling the tip of the staff, she swung herself around, effectively kicking another enemy in the face, before twisting upwards using all her upper body strength. Falling straight forward, Tenten landed lightly on her feet, pulling with her the staff that she had been using and effectively blocking a sword that had been swung at her. Twisting into a low spin, she effectively knocked all her opponents within the range of her staff off their feet. Using this opportunity, she swiftly jumped into the air, spun and three

a flood of kunais on them herself, effectively pinning them into the ground. / *That'll teach you all for underestimating a Kunoichi!* / She thought to herself, highly satisfied with her own performance.

Thrusting his fingers forward, Neji accomplished a direct hit to someone's neck – disrupting the man's oesophagus, resulting in the man choking harshly. Had he pressed a little harder or released a bit more chakra, the man would have ended up dead due to suffocation.

Dodging an incoming attack, Neji struck again, directing a hit to his next opponent's heart – stopping the man's heartbeat for a few seconds. The man before him collapsed instantly onto the floor, comatose due to the sudden stop of hearth beat and circulation of air. Had Neji directed his attack a little lower than before, the results would have been death.

Jumping to avoid another volley of weapons, Neji twisted effortlessly in midair and hit two men in the face with a snap of his palms. Continuing his rotation, Neji managed to struck another man with a raised kick before landing lightly upon his feed.

With his Byakugan activated, Neji couldn't help but feel as if he's surrounded by unworthy foes. It was simply too easy for him to dodge any incoming attacks and strike back using one-hit K-Os. And if the enemy grew smart enough to resort to long distance attacks, well, he always has the Kaiten to fall back to. Growing increasingly annoyed at the seemingly endless number of opponents, Neji performed another Kaiten in order to buy him some room to perform his next attack.

Taking a deep breath, Neji thrust forward his opened, right palm directly in front of him. "Hakke Kuushou! (Eight Trigrams: Vacuum Palm) (4)" He called as he released his offensive Taijutsu technique. The resulting blast of Chakra slammed into several men before him, sending them all backwards until they all crashed all the way through a pillar and continued through the side walls of the building, creating a large, man sized hole for Neji and the rest of the team to escape

as the front door of the establishment has been completely blocked by hulking men.

"TenTen! Lee! Lets get out of here." Neji shouted in order to grasp his team-mate's attentions. Not wanting to argue with an irate Hyuuga, both TenTen and Lee quickly followed in their team leader's footsteps, leaping and jumping over their opponents in order to make their way out of the building. All three genins made it out just in time before the rest of the pillars in the building gave way and the entire structure collapsed on top of all the missing Nins still stationed inside. Overall, it was a dramatic end to their fight.

"And what of team Kurenai? Are you going to just let the Hai-Okami (Ash Wolves) (5) continually hunt them down? You haven't sent any Shinobi's after them." Maya interrupted Jubei's fun for a second time, inquiring about how he would be treating his own sister's team.

"I'll leave that to you, I believe. You didn't pass any of your own teams so you're free to play with them as you see fit. That is, as long as you don't go easy on them." Jubei replied nonchalantly, his attention never leaving the action upon the screen created by his portal of rings. "If you think just sending them a small army of Hai-Okami will be enough to test their skills then so be it. However, I would suggest at least sending in a few more *different* summons, preferably something they can't see or beat."

Glancing hesitantly at her superior, Maya could only mumble softly to herself. "You're evil, you do know that, right, Jubei?"

Jubei's smirk turned sadistic. "Of course."

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx (***Chouji, Ino and Shino***)

Landing lightly upon their feet, Shino gracefully looked up and out, being the first to glance around and decipher where Jubei could have transported them. Behind him, Chouji and Ino silently followed

in Shino's lead, having gotten use to Shino's strange habits and insistence that as team leader, they should adhere to his orders immediately and without question (6). Looking around them discretely, team Asuma found themselves liberally surrounded by a lush, green forest – typical of Fire Country's natural environments. Birds chirped happily in the background just as millions of bugs and insects buzzed in the busy sunlight.

Shino frowned delicately in remembrance; this entire landscape looked incredibly familiar to him somehow. Behind him, Ino unceremoniously nudged Chouji in the ribs and whispered a question to her old teammate: "Hey, any idea where the hell we are?" Chouji could only shrug his shoulders.

It was a stupid question after all. In all their time together as a time, both Ino and Chouji had always just followed in either Asuma-sensei's lead or Shikamaru's lead. Though Ino boast the fact that she is the 'leader' of their old Ino-Shika-Cho team, the truth of the matter is that when it comes to serious decisions, she always deferred to Shikamaru. As such, with Shikamaru now gone and becoming a Chuunin, both Ino and Chouji were quite lost on their own. They followed orders easily enough but when left to their own devices, they could never decide upon the right course of action. And indecisiveness is a very bad trait for Shinobi to have. As such, the team was quite welcoming when Shino was transferred over to their team. Now, they were again following in the path set out by a more intelligent and far more capable team leader. Unfortunately, that doesn't mean either Ino or Chouji were used to Shino's excessive use of bugs.

As for Shino himself, he mostly ignored the antics of Ino and Chouji and tried to lead them properly. Of course, he had to emphasize early on that 'he' was the leader of this group, therefore he 'expected' respect and no arguments from them, which all worked out fine in the end.

Having finally come to a realisation as to their location, Shino couldn't help but feel a vibrant buzz go through his body at

recognising the legendary Bikouchu forest. The vivacious greenery that surrounds them, the multitude of wildlife, especially the large range of rare insects that live in this exquisite ecosystem is one thing he would never forget, not for a long time. "I know where we are now." Shino spoke softly, feeling much calmer now that he had control over the situation.

"Okay, I guess now would be a good time to open the scroll that Jubei guy gave us and start our course towards the Kuunoki." Not waiting for a reply from either of her teammates, Ino succinctly pulled out the scroll that Jubei had given and opened it... to see a completely blank page. "Eh? Is this a mistake or something? I think that Jubei-idiot gave us the wrong scroll! There's nothing in here at all!"

"But... But then how will we get to the Kuunoki?" Chouji asked in a slightly panicked voice.

Shino frowned as he released some of his Kikaichu bugs onto the surface of the scroll and found that there was Chakra embedded in there. "I think there are Chakra seals on this thing, the image of the map is sealed from our eyes. We will have to undo the seals first before we can see anything." He concluded calmly.

"Huh? But how do we do that?" Ino asked. There was an awkward pause in silence as everyone realised that none of them had the know-how or knowledge over anything regarding sealing techniques. As such, with a heavy heart, Ino packed away the scroll again.

"How what do we do..." She asked in a rather depressing voice.

Suddenly, a bright flash of light erupted some distance in the northeastern direction of their current location. Something unnatural was occurring – Shino was sure – as hundreds of insects and birds took to the sky in a clatter of sound and stunned shock. Even Ino and Chouji tensed in the sudden onslaught of screeching bird sounds and the buzzing of insects in the air, while Shino just frowned in displeasure.

"What the hell was that?" Ino summered softly. Chouji could only shrug in apprehension; both looking towards Shino for guidance.

"We'll find out." Shino answered flatly, ignoring the gulp of apprehension swallowed by Chouji and the high tension upon Ino's hand as she grasped the handle of her sword tightly.

Walking towards the origin of the flash of light, team Asuma stumbled upon a strange sight. Before them was a giant, burnt seal on the ground. There was a thick but small circle within a large square within another, larger circle that was cut diagonally from each corner (creating 4 identical triangles). From the centre of each bottom line of the triangles is another line that reaches the edges of the original large circle. In each section of space, there were burnt impressions of words that once filled the space (7). Unfortunately, these words have been visibly scorched beyond recognition and neither Ino, Chouji nor Shino could identify the missing characters. Not only that, but none of the members of team Asuma (past or present) were Seal specialists (8) so they were unable to even guess at what these markings could have meant.

But before Shino and the others could do anything except blink, they found themselves with a kunai to their throats. Standing before Shino and Chouji was a teenager of around 16 years of age nonchalantly holding a kunai each to Shino and Chouji's throat. He had reddish brown hair that framed his delicate looking face on both sides, reaching to the end of his chin, and very light green eyes (the same shade as Gaara) with a freckled face but pale-ish creamy-like skin. He wore a red, three-quarter-sleeve turtleneck under a sleeveless brown jacket with a blue scarf wrapped around his seemingly very warm neck. He also wore orangey baggy but comfortable long pants, hiding the top half of his boots. Delicately woven into the bottom ends of his jacket front is a Ninja forehead protector with a strange symbol carved onto it – four dots, three in a diagonal line, and one just off to the left of them.

"Ninja's of the Hidden Leaf; allies. Release them, Daiku." A flat and monotone voice spoke behind Ino. Even as the voice announced

these words, the hidden person standing behind Ino - of whom the words originated from – also released the kunai that had been aimed at Ino's neck just seconds before. Not letting this chance go and still feeling angry about being taken hostage (even if it had only been a few seconds), Ino instantly struck backwards with a powerful elbow. Unfortunately for Ino, her opponent was fast, able to jump back in time to avoid the blow. Having wasted her effort and not willing to bare her back to an enemy for a second longer, Ino launched forward, leaning down and spun in a full circle before directing her heated glare at her opponent – only to find a very short girl as her adversary.

"Enough of this, we are not your enemies." The mysterious girl stated flatly once more. Although Ino still didn't feel that she could trust the girl's words, the fact that the boy named Daiku had also taken his kunais away from her team mate's throat helped a little in lowering her fear.

Almost a complete opposite of her red headed teammate, the short girl was very different in character, stance, and manner. The girl was very short, only reaching the height of Ino's shoulder, and Ino was only of average height by Konoha Kunoichi standards. She had very short, jet black hair that practically shone in the sunlight, as well as a no-nonsense look that was reflected in her cold, ebony eyes. There was a small black mole directly under her left eye – looking more like a stained tear drop than anything else upon her pristine pale face. She wore a long sleeve, high collared jumper-shirt, and her stomach area bandaged completely before disappearing into rough-looking brown shorts. Her legs, again, were completely covered by bandages before disappearing into sturdy brown boots. Upon the front-bottom part of her shorts was another woven metallic forehead protector, displaying the strange emblem of the country they belonged to.

"Who the hell are you? And what the hell are you doing in Konoha?" Ino, snapping out her former daze quickly launched into an aggressive question.

"So we are in the Fire Country then? Good, that means the jutsu didn't backfire on us." Daiku cheerfully added as he looked back at his impassive partner in a 'I'm-better-than-you-look'. "See, I told you Samure would get it to work, Hikon. You should have more confidence in us, miss-pessimist." He taunted good-naturedly.

The short girl didn't even deign the statement worthy of a reply so she did nothing more than stare impassively forward, voice silent and eyes cold.

Seeing the tension rise slightly due to his teammate's cold demeanour, Daiku couldn't help but try to dissuade any hostility. "Lighten up, Hikon. As you said - we're allies, so there's no point in fighting." Pausing slightly, Daiku suddenly came up with an idea. "Hell, we might even be able to ask for help."

Ignoring the newly introduced 'Hikon's glare of irritation; Daiku turned his attention to the still wary team Asuma. "Hi, Konoha Shinobis!" Looking upon Ino's glare, he amended quickly. "And Kunoichis! My name is Naja Daiku and I'm a Shinobi of the Hidden Snow village. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Daiku performed a rather dramatic bow at this point before quickly launching forward with the rest of his speech. "I sincerely apologise for our (that is, my team mate's and my own)..." Here, Daiku ignored Hikon's glare again. "...dreadful behaviour beforehand. We were unable to determine where exactly we had landed. Not knowing whether we were in enemy territory or allied territory, therefore we decided to take matters into our own hand and... how shall we say... take an offensive manoeuvre instead of waiting to be attacked." Daiku finished up with a bright smile upon his face. "I hope we had not caused any irreparable damage upon our countries fragile relations."

Chouji could only utter a "Huh?" in reply as Daiku was talking a little bit too fast for poor Chouji to catch up with the rest of his speech.

"Hidden Snow Village? Where the hell is that?" Ino muttered, still not very sure about whether she should trust these mysterious ninja's words or not.

"The Hidden Snow Village is a small hidden ninja village located in the Spring Country under the direction of princess Koyuki. However, I had heard that the Village itself was disbanded some time ago, since the late king's demise." Shino calmly articulated as if he was launching into a history lesson.

"Yes indeed, the village was disbanded for a time. However, it has been re-established since 2 years ago. Koyuki-hime's life had been saved by the intervention of some old members of the Shinobi village and as a sign of gratitude, she had granted rights for the village to be re-established. We are what's left of the old reign and have since rejoined the village under the united control of Koyuki-hime." Daiku rattled along happily, while Hikon could only role her eyes in annoyance.

However, the cheerful atmosphere was suddenly disrupted when a painful groan was emitted somewhere behind Hikon and Daiku's presence. Without a work, Hikon quickly turned around and walked behind one of the trees. A moment later, she reappeared again, this time half dragging – half carrying another boy. The boy was as tall as Daiku but had long, curly, chestnut brown hair covering his parts of his face. He wore a black, long sleeve, high collared turtle neck beneath a wide collared, short sleeved, lighter green jumper with trails of beads woven to the bottom. A travel-worn dark green pants over dirty looking black boots covered his legs with a metallic head protector wrapped around his right thigh.

"Oh, Samure! Sorry, we kinda forgot about you for a bit." Daiku scratched the back of his head, displaying a sheepish expression upon his face.

"Idiot." Hikon muttered under her breath even while carrying her teammate who was obviously two heads taller than herself. The entire thing looked quite comical, almost like Samure was draped haphazardly over Hikon's small, compact form.

"Hehe. Let me help." Reaching forward, Daiku took one of Samure's arms over his head and held his best friend up in a much more

comfortable standing position.

The tired or injured looking boy gave a swift sweep over Shino, Ino and Chouji's appearance before looking at Daiku. "And they are?" He asked quite succinctly, too tired to say more than lowest number of words necessary.

"Oh. Oops again. I forgot to introduce my teammates and ask for your own introduction. Anyway, these are my teammates – Gojou Hikon is the short lady by my side and Yuse Samure is the guy I'm happily dragging along for the ride. So, what about your names?" Daiku chirped optimistically.

"Aburame Shino." Shino answered succinctly.

"I'm Yamanaka Ino." Ino answered confidently.

"Akimichi Chouji. Pleasure to meet you all." Chouji gave a shy bow in reply.

"Great! Now that we're no longer strangers, do you mind telling us where the hell we are? Cause we're kinda lost." Daiku, if possible, cheered even happier than before. Samure could only groan in embarrassment, while Hikon did not display any visible sign of emotion – whether irritation or embarrassment.

Ino's eyebrow twitched in irritation. "How the hell did you get here then if you have no idea where you are?" She yelled at the obvious idiocy of the entire situation.

"Oh. We used a transportation jutsu, of course." Daiku answered as if it was the only answer in the world that mattered and that any dummy should already know this.

Ino's mouth hung open, unable to comprehend Daiku's seemingly innocent expression. Beside her, Chouji shifted slightly, trying his hardest not to laugh at Ino's incredulous look upon her face. As for

Samure, if he had the strength, he would have slapped his own face in mortification.

Samure, unlike all the other people present, knew his best friend like the back of his hand. He knew that Daiku was just putting up a facade of innocent idiocy in front of people to make people laugh. The real Daiku is actually a very sensitive and optimistic person, but he definitely wasn't an idiot. Daiku may not be the most intellectual person on the planet or even on their team, but he wasn't stupid. He always tries to create a positive atmosphere around himself, if only to make everyone around him happy and/or underestimate him. He wasn't manipulative or anything like that, but he works best under an encouraging atmosphere rather than a tensed and stress out environment. However, even Samure had to admit that Daiku was layering the cheer a little bit too thick this time, to the point of being detrimental and embarrassing. Yes, being underestimated is all good and well, but to be thought of as nothing but a cheerful idiot is not the kind of initial impression Samure would like to be viewed. Unfortunately, it's not like Samure had much of a choice at the moment.

Visibly trying to get her head around the situation at hand, Ino took a deep breath before releasing it once more. "Okay, let's start from the beginning, shall we? Who are you again? Why are you here? How did you get here from where ever you were from? And what the hell do you want?" She huffed out in agitation.

Daiku grinned unrepentantly. "My name is Naja Daiku. I, with my teammates – Gojou Hikon and Yuse Samure – are from the Hidden Snow Village, located in the Spring country some thousands of miles away, across the ocean. We been selected to participate in the mainland's... or should I say... the Hidden Air Village's special Chuunin Exam. Basically, we have two weeks to get from where we were – the Hidden Snow Village – to where we're meant to be – the Hidden Air Village. Unfortunately, it takes two weeks just to travel from the Spring Country to the main land by boat. We simply didn't have the luxury of time. SO! We decided to use one of Samure's

special transportation jutsus to get us all the way from the Spring Country to the mainland in one giant leap of space-time continuum warp jump. Now that we've survived the damn jutsu, we're lost. Get it, good?" Daiku quickly explained in one long breath.

Ino still struggled to get her head around all the information that was dumped on her in that single explanation and Chouji wasn't fairing much better either, so it was up to Shino to settle the agreement as well as explain. "You already know our names and where we are from. We are also participants of the same Chuunin Selection Exam. As for your location, we are currently located in the Bikouchu Forest in the Southern region of the Fire Country."

"Oh. Wonderful. That's great. Ow!" Samure unceremoniously stomped his heavy boots onto Daiku's feet, forcing him to stop his irrational use of adjectives.

"Then I suppose we should head northward." Hikon flatly announced as she looked towards the direction of the sun through the foliage of the forest. "It should be this way." She pointed, correctly, towards the direction of north. Not waiting for her teammates to make a move, the short, black-haired girl immediately set off towards the unforeseen destination.

"Hey." Snapping out of her stunned bemusement beforehand, Ino launched into a question of her own. "How the hell did you know that the Kuunoki is located north of here?"

Hikon turned back and glared disdainfully at Ino as if she was stupid. "Haven't you deciphered your map yet?" He snorted sarcastically.

While Ino gapped (trying to find a reply without making herself sound more stupid); it was Chouji who hesitatingly spoke up. "Um... well, none of us are very good with seals, you see. So no, we haven't been able to activate our maps yet." And unlike both of his teammates, Chouji wasn't above asking for help – he just didn't have the problem of pride in his open-minded personality. "Can you tell us how to activate it? I mean, we did tell you where you are after all?"

While Hikon thought over the trade, Daiku took the decision out of her hands. "Just apply a drop of each of your blood onto the page in the scroll and the lock will be activated. After that, it will always show you the map whenever you open the scroll."

Ino and Chouji nodded in gratitude while Hikon shrugged, not counting the trading of information as having any adverse effects. Shino on the other hand was rather curious about one thing. "Why are you so injured, Yuse-san?" He asked in a calm tone of voice.

The members of the snow team looked from one to the other before coming to a silent conclusion and Hikon was the one who finally answered. "The teleportation jutsu Samure used to transport us drains a massive amount of chakra and it isn't very reliable as to where we'll end up. As such, Samure has been rendered pretty much useless for the next two weeks due to Chakra exhaustion. That's why he's so weak at the moment." She answered truthfully.

Shino listened calmly to the explanation before coming to a conclusion himself. "Then I propose a truce and an alliance. You are one person short of a team and this disadvantage may cost you your chance at the Chuunin Exam. Since both of our teams are working towards the same goal, why don't we work together to get there. After all, this initial stage of the exam does not require us to fight one another; we just have to get there in the time limit allowed."

Ino and Chouji were slightly curious why Shino had suggested such an alliance. After all, it wasn't that they were weak or anything. And Shino didn't seem like the type of person who would help out another without anything benefit to himself.

"Why are you helping us? How can we trust you not to attack us while we are one man short?" As if repeating their hearts' thoughts, Hikon also voiced her team's concern, voice never wavering from the flat line monotone sound.

Shino shrugged in nonchalance. "There is no point in us making you an enemy. From the way you were able to corner us so easily before

hand, I believe your skills are slightly superior to ours. Though being caught in surprise did play a big part resulting in our predicament at the time, we should have sensed you none the less. I am merely proposing this alliance for the sake of proposing an alliance."

Softening his voice slightly, Shino admitted a vague fear that he's been feeling for the past few hours. "I believe that we would benefit from this alliance, because I have a bad feeling that something will happen soon and I won't be able to come out of it unscathed. As such, if we worked together instead of separate, we would have a higher chance of survival."

A few minutes passed in silence as everyone thought over Shino's words. Soon though, they all came to the conclusion that they should not look a gift horse in the mouth and shook on the alliance idea. Both teams, having come to a good understanding, all turned as a unit and headed off towards the northern direction of their location, all heading towards their desired destination – the Hidden Air Village.

"Well. That was unexpected." Jubei muttered in surprise. Snapping his fingers together, one of his giant rings instantly reacted to the command and transported the person he was looking for towards him. A second later, Hikari was standing slightly unbalanced due to the abrupt shift of location but she handled it remarkably well, considering all the times she had used Jubei's transportation ring-system to travel to different parts of the world, she was getting use to these kind of travel arrangements.

Silently making her way towards her sempai, she glanced at the two travelling teams together and listened over their conversation as they discussed whatever topics came to mind. "I see. I was wondering what kind of jutsu that boy was doing. Looks like you and Kaga-san are NOT the only people in the world to have a long range transport system."

"Humph." Jubei snorted. "Yeah, but his is unstable. No where near as reliable as mine or Kaga-sensei's. I'm just more interested in what

else he can do when he's at full power." He murmured in slight interest.

"Perhaps. Although officially a Genin, I don't know what his true level of skill and abilities are. Unlike the others, Samure is a difficult person to read." Hikari admitted.

"I suppose. Okay, you can take care of both Team Asuma and Team Snow. I've got Maya working on Team Kurenai. That will leave me with Team Gai. Agreed? (9)" Jubei easily split the various groups to the responsibility of their different proctors.

"Logical choice, agreed." Hikari nodded in reply.

End.

(1) Kiba was referring to the monsters summoned by Tayuya, the three huge creatures, each with some sort of disability (one had no arms with its head twisted upside down; another with its lips sewed together and a bandage covering its eyes; and the third whose hair is so long it completely covered its face).

(2) No offence to any females in the world. I, myself am female. I just thought that it would be something Kiba would say.

(3) Hehe, "REPRESS!" - the idea is inspired by reading way too many chapters in the **lons Series** – a Gundam Wing Fanfiction series by Sunhawk. I absolutely love that series to death, it's one of the best in Gundam Wing fanfic archives if you're into yaoi and especially if you're into 1x2. Hmm... I might even incorporate some thought hamsters next time, they're just tooooo cute.

(4) Hakke Kuushou – Eight Trigrams: Vacuum Palm: the move Neji used against Kisame in Naruto manga book 29, chapter 256. Translation by Inane, so don't blame me if it's wrong.

(5) Inspired (believe it or not) from "Haineko" (Ash Cat) – the sword used by the character Matsumoto Rangiku of **BLEACH** . Yeah, that's a good manga. I wanted something similar in the fact that it can disappear into invisible ash within a split second, but I didn't want to use a conventional sword as it's physical form. Instead, I went with the name "Hai-Ookami" which directly translates to "Ash Wolf", hence the final product.

(6) This is not an inside joke. It was inspired by watching the Bikouchu episodes in the Naruto Canon series (ie. Episodes 149, 150 and 151). I found it rather funny how in episode 149, Shino kept on insisting that Naruto abide by his command, as he is the 'team leader' appointed by Tsunade herself. Anyway, most of this part was inspired by that episode so hope you all don't mind.

(7) For those interested in seeing this diagram for your own eyes, please go to my website galleries and I should have it uploaded there. Go to my profile's page to find the link.

(8) When I say 'Seal Specialists' – I mean the people who know how to write seals and use it to manipulate an object or subject – like how Jiraiya was able to seal Itachi's fire into a scroll. I am NOT talking about hand seals. Within the other teams, they have members who are at least able to decipher the seals even if they are unable to use it for their own effects. Team Kurenai had both Hinata and Sasuke – both of whom could see chakra and how it affects the environment around them. Similarly, Team Gai has Neji. Unfortunately for Team Asuma, they don't have anyone with these abilities.

(9) Why did I split them up this way? Because of the following logic:

- Hikari was originally assigned to Team Snow, so now that Team Snow and Team Asuma have grouped together, it's still her responsibility to test Team Snow, so why not let her handle both teams.

- Jubei has a clash of interest if he were to test his own sister's team, so he left that responsibility to Maya (whom had not passed any of

the Hidden Star Genin teams of her own)

- That leaves Jubei to play/test Team Gai

For those of you who have been complaining about the long wait, it wasn't entirely my fault this time. My computer suddenly died one day – literary – as in it just wouldn't start; so I took it to the repair shop and never saw it again for about a week; hence, the wait. And for those of you who have been patiently waiting for this chapter to come out, I APPLAUD YOU!

On another note, I just thought I'd inform you all that I have uploaded some 'coloured' pictures of the Chuunin Exam participating OCs for your enjoyment. They are on my website, which you can find the links on my profile's page. Please read and review.

Chuunin Exam 1st Phase II

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Three: Chuunin Exam - First Phase II

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: This chapter will be mainly about Team Asuma and Team Snow. I originally tried to squeeze all the team's adventures into one chapter again (like last time), but it didn't work. Hope you all enjoy this chapter.

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 23

"So, we're currently in a forest full of bugs... COOL!" Daiku yelled enthusiastically. "I've never been to a real green forest before. What type of bugs do they have? Is it true that Fire Country has some huge bugs? How about horned bugs? Purple bugs? What about..."
The teenage boy continued to ramble.

"Do you ever shut up?" Ino snapped harshly at the taller boy, to which Daiku simply ignored the deadly undertone of warning.

"Ignore him, he's like that." Hikon flatly announced, unmoved by both her team-mate's enthusiasm or the overall tension still in the air. All six Genins were trudging through the mystified forest slowly but they were progressing smoothly - if you discard the fact that Daiku was talking up a storm.

"How can you stand him?" Ino muttered under her breath while she walked next to Hikon. At the front of the group, Daiku continued to pester Shino (who was leading the pack) for more information while Chouji stayed far away from the two (at the back of the group), trudging slowly since he was the one carrying a completely unconscious Samure.

Hikon returned her question with a silent, penetrating look before turning away again without so much as a word in reply; leaving Ino more confused than ever.

However the seemingly endless chatter from Daiku was brought to an abrupt halt when Chouji curiously asked a question that had been on his mind for a while now. "Daiku-san? How come you've never seen a real forest before? You must have seen some tress and stuff, right?"

Daiku's expression brightened at the interest being shown towards him by Chouji and turned around in order to face the rather chubby boy while still walking backwards in the direction of following Shino. "Well! Chouji-san. That's because I was brought up in the Water Country, on the outskirts of the Hidden Mist Village. There are very few trees in the Water Country - as you can expect, mainly because the land is way to wet to grow them. Not to mention the mist clouds the sky and sunlight isn't able to penetrate through in order to reach the plants. Though we do have a few plant life around the place, but most of it consist of sea weeds and other water-style greenery. And then when I moved back to Spring Country and joined the Snow village, there was still plenty of snow around and not that many

trees. Remember that the Spring Country was once called the 'Eternal Winter' or the 'Ever White' (1). There's a reason for that phrase - it's because the country as a whole is completely white due to the constant snowfall. As such, I've never really been a real, full-grown forest with giant trees such as these." Daiku smiled disarmingly at Chouji, giving the round boy a lift in spirit for having his question answered.

"Wait a minute. How come you stayed in Water Country first before you went back to Spring Country? Are you a missing Nin that changed alliances or what?" Ino asked in an accusatory voice.

Daiku continued to smile at the two Konoha Ninjas. "Although I was born in the Hidden Snow Village, my family and I moved to the Water country when I was very young. That was because we wanted to stay away from the influences of the wretched War Lord - Kazehana Dotou - who had staged a coup d'etat and taken over the throne of the Spring Country. However, a few years ago, Dotou was overthrown by some Konoha Ninjas, and the true monarch - Koyuki-hime. Since then, a lot of us original Ninjas of the Hidden Snow village came back to offer our allegiance to the rightful Queen." He explained in a calm and gentle voice, eyes slightly glazed as if he was thinking of his own past.

Ino looked confused though. "So, all of you abandoned your village when this warlord took power, but when the rightful person came back, you all jumped back to join her. I don't get it. Why should she trust you again after you abandoned her?"

Daiku's smile turned sad and nostalgic. "It wasn't completely the Snow Ninja's fault that we were unable to defeat Dotou. We were lured away from the palace when the coup occurred, and when we came back to help, Dotou had hired many missing Nins from other countries to support him. Basically, we were given 2 ultimatums - either join him or die. We refused and there was a large massacre, many people died. Two-thirds of the original Snow Village population were slaughtered that night before the remaining families decided to

flee, it was the only thing they could do to ensure their freedom and survival."

Chouji looked sad at hearing such a depressing story. "So you all moved to the Water Country? Is that where you all met and became friends?"

Daiku's smile completely dropped and he shook his head slowly in remembrance. "The existing Snow Ninjas scattered to the winds in all different directions. We lost all contact with one another. As I said before, my family and I settled in the Water Country. But as for the others..." Here, Daiku looked succinctly at Hikon (who just continued to ignore the conversation surrounding her) and then switched his attention to the still slumbering Samure. "Samure was picked up by a travelling Ninja band, and he learnt all sorts of things from them - elemental jutsus, sealing techniques, chakra control; anything and everything. He's the strongest of us all and the most knowledgeable." Daiku concluded with an awed look on his face.

Ino glanced at Hikon's still impassive face and asked: "What about you, Hikon? Where did you go?"

Without looking at anyone in particular, Hikon's cold voice stated out flatly. "I stayed and became a dog of the military." Not quite understanding the statement, Ino looked towards Daiku for confirmation and only saw him wince in sympathy. The tension was back in the air again and this time, it lasted through out the entire afternoon and far into the night when as a group, the Genins decided to set up camp and rest.

Early the next morning, when the sun's tip was barely seen above the horizon, Shino had woken everyone up (with the exception of Samure) efficiently and quietly. Ino and Chouji was confused by his stealthy behaviour but Daiku and Hikon seemed to understand the situation and followed in Shino's lead without question (2). The two groups silently packed up their things and moved off, taking care not to leave any tracks or evidence behind that they had been there at

all. Sneaking through the forest, hiding themselves behind the shadows of trees, Shino lead the others to a high structured rock formation before motioning them to be as quiet as possible. Still confused, Ino and Chouji followed in the other's example, leaving Samure to rest delicately at the bottom of the Stone Mountain while the rest climbed up using their Chakra. Once they had reached the top, all five Genins looked over the edge and spied upon an interesting find. They weren't alone here in the Bikouchu forest.

Before them on the low lands stood three Shinobis - there were no Hitaite (forehead protectors) visible on their bodies but it was easy for the Genins to tell that these Shinobis were at least Chuunin level, maybe even Jounin level. There was one female member and two male members. The female member had large grey-blue eyes and short brown hair that twists to each side upon her face; she wore a tight violet Gi with its shoulder pads cut out, and a large green cloth tied around her waist into a bow at the back. One of the male Shinobis was tall but thin, wore a dark, long sleeved overcoat over dark grey pants. He also wore small-rimmed glasses over his small beady eyes and had long grass-blond hair. The last member of the group was large and tall, muscular and bearded. His dark brown skin contrasted against his fellow group member's fair and whitish skin. He also had black hair and dark eyes. All three had intimidating looks upon their faces, as if they were seriously thinking about something or another.

After analysing these mysterious Shinobis, Shino motioned for them to leave, and the entire group followed without question. Picking Samure up wherever they dropped him off at previously, the two teams made their way silently until they reached a clearing some miles away from the unknown Shinobis. There, they settled down to talk over their strategies.

"So what do we do about those unknown Shinobis?" Ino went directly to the most important question at hand.

Daiku shrugged nonchalantly. "We do nothing. They are not our enemies and from what I can tell, they aren't exam participants

either. There's no point for us to fight so we might as well do our best to avoid a confrontation." He uttered calmly, with a confident undertone.

Shino frowned slightly at the suggestion. "That may be harder to do than we first anticipate."

"Why?" Hikon's one word question sliced through the confusion in the air and brought the matter back on hand.

Shino gave an uncharacteristic sigh and slumped his shoulders slightly. "I know those Ninjas."

"Eh?" Ino and Chouji voiced in surprise.

Shino nodded and continued. "They are part of the now exiled Kamizurui Clan (3), from the Hidden Rock Village. They are bug users like my clan - the Aburame. Instead of using Kikai bugs though, they use bees as their main weapon and arsenal. They are... quite powerful in their own right."

"How did you come across them before?" Ino asked, completely befuddled by the entire situation.

Shino sighed again before continuing with his story. "It was during the time after the Konoha Chuunin Exam debacle, around the same time when Sasuke defected. You all remembered that I was not one of the members set off after the Uchiha because I was helping my father with another mission, yes?"

The mention of Sasuke's name brought a dark glare upon Ino's face. She still held a deep hatred for the last remaining Uchiha due to his treatment of her in the past and especially during the time he tried to kill her. Since then, she still had not been able to find any level of absolution or forgiveness within herself towards the once-traitor. She *could not* bring herself to forgive and forget, not now and possibly not ever. Even just the mention of his name would bring a whole level of ire rise within her heart. Suffice to say, most of the other

Rookie Nine and Team Gai members have learnt to separate the two as far as possible from one another, in physical presence and verbal mentioning.

Shino coughed to gain Ino's attention again, directing her thoughts away from the once murderous Uchiha. "Anyway, during our impromptu mission, we discovered those three Nins hiding out here in the Bikouchu forest, searching for the legendary Bikouchu. Normally, we would have left them to their devices and report the incident to the Anbu so that they would handle them. But at the time, we were still nervous about any outside attacks from the Sand and the Sound. So my father and I decided to confront them as they were on Fire Country land, not Earth country. Suffice to say we fought and my father and I won the battle. However, we only won because they underestimated us and that we had luck on hand. But before we could apprehend them, they escaped across the borders. This is the first time I've seen them again."

A moment's silence reigned in the air with each member gathering his or her own thoughts (exceptions being Samure who's still sleeping). Finally, Daiku spoke up. "So, let me get this straight. They are some bug-using Ninjas from the Hidden Stone Village that are here in Fire Country territory illegally. You've met and fought them before. So that means that if we met up, we'd probably have to fight them, with or without reason. Great, just great..." He finished sarcastically.

It was then that Hikon stood up. Though her height was nowhere near intimidating levels, her cold black eyes and stiff posture demanded respect and everyone's attention was reverted to her instantly. "Send a message to your village's Ninjas to handle this situation. It is not our responsibility to take care of them. Our priority now should be to reach the Hidden Air village, not deal with this local disturbance. However, if these Ninjas approach and attack us, all bets are off." With that (the longest list of sentences she had ever spoken in the presence of Team Asuma), Hikon turned around and started trudging away, still silent as ever.

Daiku shrugged before standing up, gathered the sleeping Samure onto his back and followed after his teammate. Taking a few moments more to think over Hikon's words, Shino surmised that it was the best course of action to take for now, and so team Asuma too stood and silently followed in Hikon's footsteps. Selecting a few kikai bugs to take his message to Konoha, Shino released them into the air, pointing them towards the direction of the Hidden Leaf Village in order to warn the Anbu.

Unfortunately for Shino, fate was not on his side today. Almost as soon as the messenger Kikai bugs have disappeared into the horizon, the two Genin teams were suddenly attacked by the Hidden Stone Ninjas. "Well, look what we have here; if it isn't that bxxtxxd Aburame brat. And this time he has a group of loser friends accompanying him instead of his ugly father." The muscular member of the Stone three sneered in repulsive fury.

Shino's eyebrow narrowed in suppressed anger at the insult to his father, of which Ino loudly snapped back. "Hey, whose the losers here? You were the ones that lost last time!"

"Shut up, Brat! We underestimated you the last time; we won't be making that mistake again!" The tall man with glasses snapped back defensively.

Without further ado, the battle began when the only female member of the Kamizurui clan shouted: "Ninpou Hachimichi no Jutsu! (Ninja Art Bee Summoning Technique)" A massive swarm of bees suddenly appeared from the female's sleeves and launched themselves directly at the two Genins teams.

"Don't attack those bees; they are fakes filled with honey to trap our movements (4). Only a few of them are real, and those real ones carry a deadly poison. Everyone! Stand close behind me." Shino ordered and everyone followed his command. Holding his palms out and facing forward, Shino called forth his technique. "Mushikame no Jutsu (Bug Jar Technique)!" From Shino's sleeve, a mass of Kikaichu

bugs emerged and swarmed around the two teams in a circular, barrier style technique, killing any bees that get too close.

Beside the enemy female ninja, the tall thin man with glasses launched into his own set of hand seals followed up by a shout. "Hachi Bakudan no Jutsu (Bee Explosion Attack)!" More swarms of bees appeared, this time, each bee was attached with an explosive tag to cause far more damage.

"Shxt!" Chouji swore as he realised they were sitting ducks waiting for the explosion to happen. The rest of the Genin team screamed as the anticipated explosion erupted right on top of them, blasting each member to a different direction and burning him or her as they went.

Slightly burnt and singed but still managing to avoid most of the damage, Hikon quickly got to her feet, taking a quick glance around, deciphering the situation at hand, Hikon instantly decided on their next course of action. "Daiku! Defensive position, fire country is not advantageous to your abilities! Take Samure somewhere safe with lots of water. We'll come for you later." She ordered snappishly, her eyes narrowed as they focussed completely on her enemies (who seemed very smug at the moment).

"Hai!" Not arguing with Hikon's sour mood, Daiku quickly picked up the luckily unhurt Samure and jumped away, looking desperately for a good water source because most of his techniques require ice or water to be available. Soon, Daiku disappeared into the trees.

"You think that we're just going to let you go so easily. Jibachi, back me up. Kurobachi! Go after those two!" The female member of the enemy Ninja group called and the large man with the beard jumped after the disappearing Daiku.

Without a word, Hikon suddenly appeared right in front of the now named Kurobachi. With speed that could rival Lee on his good days, Hiko delivered a variety of small but rapid strikes against Kurobachi's neck, shoulders, nose, arms, forehead, and chest before quickly flipping in mid air and delivering a full-on kick directly into the man's

face. When the multitude of impacts finally registering in the enemy Ninja's mind, it was already too late for him to dodge Hikon's final kick. However, while falling backwards (due to Hikon's kick), Kurobachi was able to clear his mind enough to realise that Hikon had followed in his direction, raising two one-foot, short swords, all ready to slash at his chest. Without conscious thought, Kurobachi quickly performed a Kowarimi technique in order to get away from the dangerous yet small Kunoichi.

Stabbing what she had thought was the enemy ninja; Hikon did not show her surprise when the body of her opponent suddenly melted into a sticky, yellowy-brown substance. "Mitsu Kowarimi no jutsu (Honey Substitution Technique)." A voice called out from behind her that she easily recognised as her opponents. Before Kurobachi had a chance to attack her from behind however, Hikon (with her impressive speed) had already jumped away, landing some distance away from where she had just stood.

/ She's FAST! / This was the only conscious thought that went through Ino, Chouji and even Shino's mind as they witnessed Hikon and Kurobachi's battle.

"Che." The female enemy snorted in disgust before performing another set of familiar hand seals. "Hachimichi no Jutsu (Bee Summoning Technique)!"

Reacting to the threat, Shino quickly stood and had his hands raised as well. "Kikaichu! (Destruction bugs)". As the two mass of flying insects met, a mini-war began.

While the female member was busy dealing with Shino, her other two group members were not standing around being idle. Both men launched into their own set of hand seals in support of their female member. "I'll distract them, Suzumebachi, Kurobachi." Jibachi finished first, shouting out his technique. "Hachi Senbon no Jutsu! (Thousand Bee Stings)" Again, a mass of bees suddenly emerged from no where and started firing tiny pins directly at the group of genins.

Staggering up to his feet, wanting to support Shino's efforts in defending his team, Chouji quickly performed his own unique family technique. "Baika no Jutsu! (Multi-size technique) Nikudan Sensha! (Meat Tank)" Expanding his body shape into the size of a large ball, Chouji quickly spun into action, easily deflecting the tiny pins and stings as they were repelled off his rolling body and away from his friends. Soon, Chouji shifted his attention from the tiny bees towards the summoner of the bees. Charging towards his enemy full throttle, Chouji was unable to see that the last member of the Hidden Stone Ninja team had finished his own set of seals.

Slamming an opened palm onto the ground, Kurobachi called out his final attack. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! (Summoning Technique)" A large cloud of white smoke erupted from where Kurobachi had summoned forth his technique. And when the clouds cleared, there was a giant bee ready and waiting for further orders. "Go!" Kurobachi yelled at his summon. "Kill them all!"

Chouji, having directed all his energy spinning in the direction of his enemies, intending to literary roll over them, was met with a massive force of wind as the giant bee flapped its delicate looking wings at a frightening pace, creating giant gusts of wind in order to stop Chouji's momentum. Although with his own self-spinning force, Chouji was able to deflect most of the wind's energy and direction, the scale in which the enemy had focussed so completely on stopping Chouji's spin begun to take affect. Soon, Chouji's still rolling form was lifted right off the ground due to the force of the wind, and once he had lost traction with the ground, it was easy to blast Chouji away with a singular discharge of air current.

The wind that was caused by the giant bee's wings didn't just blow away Chouji; it also blew away most of Shino's Kikai bugs as well, leaving the black haired boy almost completely defenceless with regard to his current standing. Taking advantage of the boy's current weakness, Suzumebachi (the now named female enemy Ninja) quickly launched herself at her prey, dodging a weak punch from the Aburame brat; she managed to twist around and stab Shino in his

right shoulders with a strange looking blade. Grunting in pain at the abrupt stabbing, Shino quickly performed a quick technique to escape. "Mushi Bunshin. (Bug Clone)" With those softly muttered words, Shino's form dissolved into the last of his Kikai bugs while the real Shino re-emerged from some distance away, hand still holding onto his injured shoulder, trying to stop the blood from flowing too freely.

Suzumebachi gave Shino a maniacal glare as she ignored the bugs that surrounded her, just waiting to attack. "I wouldn't use those ridiculous bugs of yours now, Aburame-brat." Pausing for effect, she simply flicked some of the Kikai bugs off her person with nonchalance. "You see, the dagger I stabbed you with is stained with an incredibly strong poison, messing up your inner Chakra coils as well as your Chakra control, corroding your body from within. Basically, you're stupid bugs won't be able to recognise your own chakra anymore, making them more of a danger than a help to you. If you use your chakra now, they will see you as an enemy and start attacking you, not caring for the fact that you are their master and host. And when the host dies, well... they die too." Suzumebachi described this horrible scenario with gleeful anticipation. "And do you know what the worse thing is... Even if you don't use Chakra, your body will still be affected. The poison will eat away at your energy, your flesh and your life force. You'll die, boy - one way or another. You will never be able to get your hands on a cure, I guarantee it." Her smile became sadistic and cruel in nature.

Frowning in surprise and suppressed fear, Shino could do nothing but stand firm without using his innate nature to call upon his bugs. If what she said was true, just using Chakra to communicate with his Kikai colonies could very well mean his death, and it was simply too much of a risk to take. However, if he didn't have the assistance of his bugs with him, then Shino was completely defenceless. His Taijutsu skills were average but he had no other talents to speak of, and certainly none to a level in which that can compare with his opponents. Let's face it, without his bugs - Shino was screwed.

This was why Shino was eternally grateful when Ino took this opportunity to attack his currently gloating opponent (who had been standing completely still just gazing at Shino). "Shintenshin no Jutsu! (Body Mind Switch Technique)!" With that, Ino slumped forward and onto the ground unceremoniously while Suzumebachi had jerked in contact with Ino's alien mind invasion.

With Ino now in full control of Suzumebachi's body, Shino quickly walked towards Ino's original body (now slumped onto the ground), careful to avoid any and all of his own bugs less they see him as an enemy. Acting quickly, Ino (now in Suzumebachi's body) held the poisonous blade against her own throat and cried out loudly. "STOP! Or else I'll kill this body!"

Both Jibachi and Kurobachi looked at Suzumebachi first in confusion, then in rising fury once they realised what was going on. Even the giant Bee summoning had paused in its attack, inherently knowing that its summoner was in trouble at the moment. "Now that I have your attention..." Ino (in Suzumebachi's body) smirked in confidence. "Get rid of the giant eyesore!" When nobody moved, Ino placed the dagger dangerously close to her neck. "I SAID! Get rid of that giant, flying eyesore!" Instantly, the Bee summon disappeared into smoke. "Good. Now listen up! I'll release her if you guys give us the antidote to the poison on this dagger." She pressed the dagger closer to her own body, to indicate that it was *that* specific dagger she was talking about.

Both men didn't move for a few minutes. Finally, Jibachi spoke. "We'll need time to gather the herbs and create the anti-venom."

Suspicious, Ino pressed the dagger closer, just a hair from her throat. "No, you give us the antidote NOW." She surmised.

Now, Kurobachi looked slightly panicked. "We're not lying. We don't have the antidote on our persons. We have to make it from scratch because while the poison can last for a long time, the antidotes' effects only works within the first 2 hours after it has been made. We can't store the antidote due to its corroding factors eating away its

own properties. We WILL need time to make it." He emphasized with reason.

"I don't believe you!" Ino growled lowly in a threatening manner. The tension in the air rose even higher. Shino, now sitting beside Ino's body was starting to feel tired and sick. Sweat rolled down all over his body, he felt hot and sticky. And at the same time, he also felt a burning sensation from within, originating from his injured shoulder to all over his body. He knew he might not survive long enough for them to make this antidote, even if it is the only way to save him. It was at that moment that Chouji stumbled into the clearing, evidently exhausted from his previous battle but still willing to fight in order to defend his teammates. Suffice to say, his presence did nothing to lower the tension, in fact, quite the opposite occurred.

Getting tired of this standstill, Hikon finally spoke up from her place at the side of the clearing. Gazing flatly at Ino, Hikon spoke, her voice strong and commanding. "Ino, slice the arm of the woman you inhibit in order to infect her. If they dare to provide us with the wrong antidote we can test it on the woman first." Refocusing her attention to the two now panicked enemy Shinobis, Hikon continued to speak. "You have 2 days to come up with an antidote and come find us. If you have not achieved that, then your team mate dies." She warned flatly as if that was the ultimate truth.

Finished with her orders, Hikon stood firmly from her original crouched position and started to walk away. She walked towards Shino, held a hand out for him to grab (of which he did), placed his arm around her shoulder and the two of them started staggering away. Although Hikon had her back towards her enemies, she could tell by sound alone that no one other than herself had moved. "What are you waiting for? An invitation? Get to it!" She snapped angrily and the two enemy ninjas instantly disappeared to the trees.

Chouji also picked up Ino's original body and walked along behind Hikon and Shino, following in their lead. Ino, while still in Suzumebachi's body continued to hold the poisoned dagger to her throat, but had not sliced her skin yet. She wanted to wait until she

had reached somewhere safe before she would let herself be infected. "Hey, Hikon." Ino (in Suzumebachi's body and using her voice) called out in curiosity, even while she was still very cautious about her surrounding. "Where are we going again?"

"To the stream, Daiku and Samure are bound to be there. And with water close by, Daiku would make the entire place easily defensible." Pausing slightly to reorganise her grip on Shino's arm, Hikon continued with her explanation. "Daiku is an Ice and Water technique specialist. With plentiful amounts of water, he can be a very powerful opponent." She concluded succinctly and all members of Team Asuma started hearing the sounds of a river flowing by some distance away.

After a few minutes of trudging through the undergrowth of the massive forest, the beaten and battered team Asuma (plus Hikon) finally arrived at the riverside. And just as Hikon had concluded before, there sat Daiku and Samure leaning against the tree as if they didn't have a care in the world - well, Daiku did anyway, Samure was still unconscious, even after the entire ordeal.

"Yo! What happened? You all looked like you've been beaten up bad? Are those guys really that strong?" Daiku, for once, discarded his cheerful reverie as he spoke with concern in his voice, shifting his gaze from one battered looking member to another.

"They used underhanded tactics and poisoned Shino. Ino took control of the female's body..." Hikon nodded towards Suzumebachi's body. "And we made a deal to trade the woman with the antidote once it has been made." She finished monotonously.

Nodding in understanding, Daiku immediately got to work - ushering Chouji to place the slumbering Ino's body next to Samure, Daiku also chastised Chouji to take a rest himself. He then helped Hikon manoeuvre Shino to rest next to Ino, before finally tackling the last thing they needed to do - which was to tie up Suzumebachi's body against a tree. Once the final act was done, Ino immediately released herself from her host's body, already exhausted for having

possessed the woman's body for so long. With their enemy tied up, Hikon also took this opportunity to make a quick but small cut on the woman's arms while she was still unconscious, infecting Suzumebachi quickly and cleaning. From there on, the entire team set up camp and waited.

Two days passed in similar fashion with Team Snow and Team Asuma resting lightly and cautiously where they had set up camp. Shino and Suzumebachi however, had slowly but surely become very sick, to the point of not being able to move at all. Sweat covered their entire body, and the burning sensation within their infected bodies was almost too excruciating for them to handle. Chouji and the now recovered Ino were both very worried over the ailing health of their teammate. Of the members of the Snow team, only Hikon had stayed completely focussed through out the entire ordeal. Even Daiku was very concerned over their situation; he wished that there was something he could have done to help; but he was no medic nin and had absolutely no idea on how to handle poisons.

Chouji had made himself somewhat useful by finding some herbal plants within the Bikouchu forest in order to make painkillers to numb the pain within Shino and even Suzumebachi's bodies, but these painkillers would easily wear off with time. Chouji had also made it a point to collect some of the deadly poison from the dagger and place it into a sealed container.

Having taken part in Tsunade's special Medical Ninja Academy training, Chouji had learnt much about Herbology and the various properties of certain plants. Unfortunately for team Asuma however, Chouji's chakra control was not substantial enough to enable him to become a full-fledged frontline Medical Ninja. Instead, Chouji focussed his studies on what he was good at, food and plant life - resulting in him becoming an Herbs speciality. With this knowledge, Chouji continued to try and ease the pain of his teammate. Regrettably, the poison was just too potent for him to make much leeway in pain relief. As such, these two days passed miserably for all members of Team Asuma and Team Snow.

Finally, on the third official day from the beginning of their journey towards the Hidden Air Village, the two remaining Kamizurui Clan members appeared, both holding their palms opened and up for everyone to see clearly. It was obviously a sign of surrender.

"Where's the antidote?!" Ino demanded, holding a kunai threateningly at Suzumebachi's throat, even though the female ninja looked too sick to notice.

"Here." The tall blonde man - Jibachi slowly moved his hands into his coat, a move that all members of Team Asuma and Team Snow watched like hawks. He then slowly pulled out a small vial of blue-blackish liquid. "There's only enough for those two people, it's a very potent antidote, and it must be administered within the next hour or else its affects will wear off."

Without waiting for anything else, Hikon immediately jumped into action. In a split second, she had somehow manage to appear in front of Jibachi, grabbed the vial and reappeared in front of the trapped female ninja, with the vial opened and ready to pour the liquid down her throat. One drop, two drops later, Hikon took the vial away and watched both Suzumebachi's reaction to the antidote as well as watching for any suspicious move from the other Kamizurui Clan members.

It was a tense half hour before Suzumebachi finally showed some sign of recovering from her poisoned state. Her normal skin colour was returning and her breathing was stabilising. Seeing this as a good enough sign, Hikon quickly moved towards Shino, practically shoving the vial's contents directly down his throat without any prior warning. Though choking slightly at the unexpected liquid, Shino did somehow manage to drink everything. The affects (to Shino at least) were immediately, he could breath a deep sigh of relief that he won't die a painful death anymore.

"Hey. We already did what you told us to do, now release Suzumebachi!" The taller of the two Kamizurui clan members yelled

out in nervousness. Hikon nodded in acceptance, and both Chouji and Ino moved to release Suzumebachi's bonds. The female enemy almost collapsed completely onto the floor due to her weakness, but Chouji caught her at the last minute, and with Ino's help, the two managed to shuffle Suzumebachi towards her comrades. Once they were close enough, Suzumebachi was pushed towards her teammates; Kurobachi immediately reached out and caught her firmly within his arms.

However instead of just moving on, Jibachi suddenly launched into a set of seals: "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! (Summoning Technique)" Once again, the familiar giant bee appeared forth and started buzzing at length, ready to attack at a single command.

"Daiku, NOW!" Hikon ordered, reaching into her Ninja pouch to draw out some special kunai.

"Got it!" Daiku stated with the calmest tone of voice the others have ever heard from him. Quickly finishing up the hand seals he had started previously, Daiku called out confidently, his calm composure a complete opposite from his normally cheerful personality.

"Hyouroro no Jutsu (Ice Wall Technique)!" A giant wall of water suddenly rose up from the stream behind them, it circled the two genin teams, rising higher and stronger, forming a giant igloo before suddenly freezing into a block of thick ice, protecting the group from the enemy ninjas.

The giant bee launched itself at the frozen igloo shaped tomb, smashing its large head into the immovable ice. The ice withstood the impact with only a few chinks appearing around the impact zone. The giant bee retreated only to ram the frozen structure once more, like a battering ram determined to break through Daiku's defences.

However, Daiku wasn't sitting idly either, he had already prepared his next jutsu, ready for the next assault. "Hyouten: Tsubame Fubuki! (Ice Element: Swallow Blizzard) (5)" A flock of strange swallow shaped icicles suddenly launched itself out of the trickling stream behind the genin teams, the icicles flew into the air gracefully before

turning and flying directly at the giant bee. The ice projectiles shot into the giant bee's side like painful bullets, resulting in the bee shuddering in pain from the multiple assaults.

Unfortunately for the bee, Daiku wasn't prepared to give the summoned creature any reprieve. "Hyouten! Aisu Shin no jutsu! (Ice Element! Ice needles technique!)" This time, instead of using water from the depleting stream behind him, he used the water that was already in the ice wall he had created beforehand. Thousands upon thousands of ice needles formed out of the once frozen igloo structure and erupted forth into all directions. Many needles embedded deeply into the giant bee, others managed to injure the three Kamizurui Ninjas, even though they were hiding behind some large trees. But most of the needles struck harmlessly against trees, leaves and especially the ground. The entire area was littered with Daiku's ice needles, looking like a mini storm of ice needles.

"Hyo Bakudan!" Hikon jumped gracefully into the air before throwing three sharp kunais towards three different targets - one towards the giant bee, another towards Jibachi, while the third aimed at Kurobachi, who was still holding tightly onto Suzumebachi. On the hilt of each of the kunais were tied a strange blue ball that glinted in the sunlight. When the kunai finally impacted against its targets, an eruption of ice (in the form of deadly spikes) immediately drove deep into the giant bee, killing it instantly. At the same time as the giant summoned creature disappearing into smoke, Jibachi and Kurobachi were also struck by Hikon's kunais as well. But instead of piercing them with shards of ice, the ice bomb seemed to catch the three Kamizurui Ninjas unaware, and grew around them, trapping the figures into a giant block of ice.

Stunned by the high level jutsus used by Daiku and Hikon, the members of Team Asuma were feeling incredibly relieved that they didn't have Team Snow as an enemy. Every one (even Hikon this time) released a deep sigh of relief at finally ending this confrontation. Now they can finally move on with their journey.

"Hn. The ice will last a few more days before melting away naturally. By that time, your Anbu should have already reached here. Let's leave now, we've wasted enough time as is." Hikon analysed before she started packing up the camp. Chouji helped Shino to his feet, while Daiku again had to carry the still sleeping Samure. With Hikon leading the pack and Ino at the back, the group of six Genins started walking towards the Northern direction, this time, determined to not let anything else stand in their way of getting to the Hidden Air Village.

"Not gonna let you go so easily, boys and girls..." Hikari muttered quietly to herself as she watched the two teams of Genins walk off into the distance from her perch on a tall tree branch.

"The fun has only JUST begun." Giggling slightly to herself, Hikari couldn't wait to finally test them to their full abilities. */ Although I wished I could have tested Samure too. But he's completely out of it for the next two weeks. Oh well, I guess I can't have everything go my way.* / With that last thought, Hikari disappeared from her perch in a bright flash of white light.

The next day passed peacefully for Team Asuma and Team Snow. There were no enemies to fight; there were no shortages of food (as Shino was very good at finding them, and Chouji with his knowledge of edible plants). Overall, the Genins were happy with the ease of their travels, especially considering they made good distance. The two Genin teams had moved out of the Bikouchu forest many hours ago, and had managed to pass through the heart of Fire Country, still heading in the northern direction. By Hikon and Shino's calculation (after consulting the now activated map), at their current speed of travel they would be able to reach the Hidden Air Village in approximately 4 or 5 days of travel, which is good news to all. Unfortunately for them, their luck would unexpectedly run out the very next day.

On the fourth day of their journey, the morning started out calm and peaceful like the day before. The Genins unpacked their campsite, strapped on their backpacks and started making their way to the Kuunoki again. After a few hours of walking steadily, Shino suddenly called for a halt by lifting his hand in a 'stop' motion.

Looking back at the still recovering Shino, Ino asked quietly. "What is it? Why did we stop?"

Shino frowned in concentration. "My Kikaichu bugs are acting strangely." He finally answered. Having been cured from the poison and taking a full day to recover, Shino had slowly but surely recuperated his energy levels and Chakra bond with his bugs. However, having lived without the insects in his body for almost two days straight, Shino still found it difficult to command them at will.

This time, it was Hikon who frowned as she walked towards a nearby tree. Placing her palm upon the surface of the tree, she then emitted a small amount of chakra to scan the surroundings. Unfortunately for Hikon, it was her chakra signature that activated the hidden Jutsu.

Snapping her eyes wide opened at the feeling that coursed through her palms, Hikon quickly looked back at the other Genins and shouted out a warning. "It's a high level Genjutsu! We have to get out of here NOW!" Regrettably, her warning came too late to save anyone.

A large black shadow suddenly appeared beneath their feet, and as if they had stepped into a giant black hole, everyone started falling into the dark abyss. No one had enough time to jump away at all, and before they even knew what was happening they had already been swallowed by the shadow. When all the participating Genins were gone, the blackness of the wormhole disappeared, leaving behind a small but odd-looking urn. It was round with an earthen brown texture, standing on three short, stubby legs like a tripod. It had a circular ring around the upper section of its body that had holes cut out of it. Its top was covered by a stopper of some sort. The only thing incriminating about the unique urn is that a special

Ninja note, with the character for 'darkness' imprinted on it, was attached to the front of the urn. It also had a small Kuunoki no Sato symbol carved onto the upper regions of the urn, above the ring of holes but right below the stopper (6).

From a branch high up in a near by tree, Hikari watched the progression almost gleefully.

Darkness welcomed the Genins.

After a few long seconds of falling, the Genin teams finally landed onto something stable. Though every member of Team Asuma and Team Snow landed haphazardly onto the hard ground beneath them (not that they could see the ground at all), they still managed to *not* kill themselves. Each had used chakra in a way to soften their landing and although they had some scrapes and bruises, none were fatal or would hamper their movement in any way.

"Ug..." Daiku grunted in annoyance, having not only to occupy himself with landing safely but also with a sleeping Samure on his back as well. He was damn lucky that he hadn't broken any bones with his abrupt and awkward landing. "Hey, is everyone here? And are anyone hurt?" He asked, concerned that someone might have been hurt during their impromptu adventure. A few 'ahs' and 'uns' met Daiku's ears and he assumed that everyone had landed all right.

"Geese, where the hell are we?" Ino's voice rang out from the darkness.

Suddenly, a sizzling sound hissed and soon, a bright spark appeared from a flash held in Hikon's capable hands. The light from the flash illuminated the near by features of darkness, revealing that everyone was present and well. But the light was still not strong enough to completely reveal the room or whatever place they find themselves in at the moment. Looking around, Hikon checked out the various injuries and bruises everyone had collected during their unprepared

fall, but since nothing gained were fatal, she let her mind drift off to plan their strategies from here on out.

"Samure, Daiku and myself only has 3 flashes each, and each flash will last us an hour, how about you?" Hikon directed her question towards Chouji, Ino and Shino. Unfortunately, ninja flashes were not part of the normal equipment stored in either Chouji, Ino or Shino's pouches and so, the three Konoha Genins could only shook their heads in dismay, stating that they didn't have any flashes at all to add. Hikon nodded in acknowledgement and concluded her speculation: "So that means that if we ration and use the flashes wisely, we'll still only have about 9 hours of illumination. Let's use these 9 hours to quickly figure out how to get out of here."

"Where is *here* anyway?" Ino insisted on knowing, since the last thing she heard was regarding some sort of Genjutsu.

"We are trapped in a high level Genjutsu." Hikon answered without pause.

"But doesn't that mean that all we have to do is a Genjutsu-dispel and we should be fine." Ino smiled at the relative ease of the solution. She immediately formed the general Genjutsu dispelling hand seals and called out her technique: "Genjutsu Kai!"

Nothing happened. They were still trapped in darkness.

"What the hell?!" Ino screamed in surprise at the uselessness of her technique.

"As I said before, we are trapped in a **high level Genjutsu** . Let me explain the differences between a normal academy Genjutsu (like the Henge), a medium level Genjutsu, and a 'high-end' level Genjutsu. Genjutsu are techniques that are applied to an opponent through their five senses. In doing so, you can control the chakra that flows through their cerebral system. In other words, you are attacking and controlling their mind. Academy level Genjutsu (like Henge) are just that, simple illusions that can be dispelled easily with

a single hand seal and a concentration of Chakra. Medium level Genjutsu require the victim to fight their own mind and body in order to overcome something that they (consciously) know isn't real, but instinctively still fear. It takes a very disciplined individual to be able to beat your own mind and body with will alone. **High level**

Genjutsu however is a completely different ball game. We classify high-level Genjutsu when what appears as an illusion is, in actuality, real. And what appears real is, in actuality, an illusion." Hikon took up a teacher's stance and started lecturing.

"Huh?" Ino's dumbfounded expression was mirrored by Chouji, and Shino had a small frown on his face indicating his own confusion.

"High level Genjutsu is classified as such because it is so good that it manipulates your mind to a point where it inflicts the body with wounds and injuries that shouldn't be real, but are... because your mind believes it to be real." Hikon continued explaining. But seeing that Ino, Chouji and Shino still aren't getting it, she decided to use an example instead.

"For example, if a man is put under a high level Genjutsu, he can be manipulated to the point where he genuinely believe that he was married, with a child, and lived in a certain section of the world; even if he had only vaguely been to the place, and never had a wife or child in the first place. He would be so convinced of the reality of the Genjutsu; he would automatically take on the local accent of his 'supposed' homeland. He would sprout made-up stories of his 'supposed' wife and child; hold on to mementos and presents that were 'supposedly' from his none-existent family. He would absolutely believe it to be true, until you ask him what his wife looked like, or when his child's birthday was, or when he first met his wife. Things like those questions start rupturing the man's made up reality. And with the shattering of the illusion, the man's mind breaks as well. (7) A high level Genjutsu is very dangerous, not just because it's hard to make in the first place, but that once it is activated, you CANNOT tell what is real and what isn't any more. It's like your mind has been fxxked over and you have no concept of who 'you' are anymore."

Hikon have a very realistic and scary description of what a high level Genjutsu is capable. "Even for trained Ninjas, it is still very difficult for them to keep their minds intact after realising they had been under a high level Genjutsu." She stated with finality, hammering in the level of danger they were in at the moment.

"If what you say is true, then how do we get out of this high level Genjutsu that we are trapped in. And how can you distinguish this to be a high level Genjutsu in the first place? I am unable to tell whether my mind and chakra are being influenced at the moment, and neither does my Kikaichu bugs react in any way." Shino concluded, curious as to Hikon's explanations.

"I can tell this is a high level Genjutsu because I had managed to touch it briefly when we first fell through. Remember the time I touched the tree and tried to analyse it, well, it turns out that there was no tree to begin with. I was touching thin air and didn't even know it. Whoever made this Genjutsu is very good." Hikon admitted half-heartedly under her breath.

Taking another moment to look around them, Hikon answered Shino's third question rather distractedly. "As to how it is 'seems' as if it isn't affecting your Kikaichu bugs, you're wrong. The Genjutsu is an 'area-wide' Genjutsu, not one of those 'single-person target' Genjutsu attacks. Basically, anyone who walks into the Genjutsu sealed area becomes affected, be it human, animal or insect. Because high-level Genjutsu are so hard to detect, it's often too late for a victim when they finally realised what they sense (through their five senses) are completely false. Your Kikaichu bugs are already under the influence of the Genjutsu because they feed off chakra, be it your chakra or someone else's, and it is the chakra that can poison their mind via Genjutsu. They're probably made to believe that they are perfectly fine when in fact, they aren't."

Pausing again to sigh, Hikon's shoulders tensed in preparation to tackle their next obstacle, the high level Genjutsu that has them trapped. "As for how we get out of this Genjutsu trap... I don't know... but I'll work on it. High-level Genjutsu are notoriously hard to break,

and even harder to detect. Since we've already detected it, that's half the battle, but now the hardest part of the fight shall begin." She answered waveringly, as if unsure whether or not she could pull off her promised stunt.

"Okay, I get it. But how come you know so much about Genjutsu?" Ino asked curiously, having learnt more about Genjutsu now than she ever did during the academy.

"I'm a Genjutsu specialist." Hikon answered succinctly.

" ***I'm impressed. You're very astute, Hikon-kun*** . (8)" Out of nowhere, an ambient voice rang out from the darkness in a deceptively cheerful manner.

"Who the hell are you? And where are you?" Ino shouted in dismay and surprise.

" ***My, have you forgotten my voice already, Ino-chan. I'm disappointed in you...*** " The echoing voice stated again.

"That voice, it seems familiar." This time, it was Chouji who muttered under his breath. He knew he had heard that voice somewhere, but he couldn't remember where and whom.

Snapping his fingers in remembrance, Daiku abruptly called out in excitement. "Is that you, Raitei-san? Hikari Raitei-san?" And with that, Chouji, Shino and Ino all released a sigh of relief as they too, finally recognised the voice.

" ***You've got a good memory, Daiku-kun.*** " Hikari's voice complimented. However, she continued on again, this time in a more subdued voice. " ***Anyway, no time to chat at the moment. I just thought I'd warn you that while you are trapped inside this Genjutsu container, time travels at a much slower pace than the outside world. As such, every hour you spend in the darkness, a whole day has passed out here. So if I were you, I wouldn't waste any time I have. Remember, you only have one and a half***

weeks now to get to the Kuunoki, wish you all the best of luck! "
With that said, the voice disappeared again without concern.

"WHAT?!" Ino screamed in retaliation.

Hikon gave an uncharacteristic sigh, shoulders dropping as if what Hikari had just said, only confirmed her own suspicions. "Just as I thought."

"What the hell does she mean? She can't affect time?! Can she?" Ino's continued screech was directed at Hikon, hoping against hope that what Hikari said was wrong.

"On the contrary, my body (my heart beat, and my pulse) tells me that a long time has already passed, even though my mind keeps on reminding me that we've only talked for a few minutes. This is the affect of a high level Genjutsu. You have absolutely no control over your surrounding and especially no control over yourself." Hikon concluded dismally. "However, we are also lucky in a sense." She abruptly said, her mind jumping to various scenarios that could have occurred but didn't.

"What do you mean we are lucky? What could be worse than this? We're stuck in who knows where, and have no way out, or at least, we have no idea how to get out." Chouji spoke up with a panicky voice, feeling very depressed and helpless at the moment.

"Hikari-san did not send any predators after us. Her only aim is to delay us and then probably release us when the time limit is up. She's not here to kill us. Had that been her original aim, we would have already died hours ago, or by our current senses, minutes ago." Hikon answered monotonously, and the others gulped in apprehension, silently thanking Hikari that she hadn't wanted them dead in any way.

Giving a final sigh, Hikari gave the torch to Chouji to hold (whom frowned and looked at her in confusion), before she promptly sat down on the seemingly black floor. Legs crossed and back straight,

Hikon placed her hands on top of her bent knees in a strange hand seal. Her thumb, index finger and little finger were stretched out, while her middle and ring fingers were folded in. Lastly, Hikon closed her eyes and fell into a meditative conditioning, completely aware and yet unaware of everything around her.

"What is she doing?" Shino whispered towards Daiku while motioning for Ino and Chouji to keep quiet less they disrupt whatever Hikon was doing. The question was directed at Daiku specifically because Daiku was the only person (awake at the moment) that could answer their question.

Daiku's face showed concern and calm at the same time, as if resigned that there was nothing more he could do to help. "Hikon is going into a meditative trance in order to analyse how the Genjutsu is affecting her body - that is, her real body and mind, not this illusionary one that we're all stuck in. The only way to break a high level Genjutsu is to break it from within. In the case of an 'area-wide' Genjutsu seal, as long as one person is able to break the Genjutsu, then everyone can escape. Until Hikon somehow manages to break the Genjutsu however, we're all pretty much useless. There really isn't anything we could do." Daiku answered miserably, unhappy about the fact that there was nothing he could do.

"Perhaps we could do something." Inputted Chouji. "How about we try to see if we can reach an 'edge' or a 'wall' or 'blockage' somewhere in this darkness?" He asked curiously. "Maybe that might help us feel a bit more secure in this place." Chouji shuffled nervously, unable to feel safe being surrounded by such blackness. Shikamaru may have been a shadow user, but even he would feel unsettled in such still darkness.

"Does that mean we have to split up and check it out ourselves?" Ino asked miserably, not liking the idea at all.

"No, I can send my Kikaichu bugs out to investigate." And without further ado, Shino did just that. A mass of Kikaichu bugs emerged from his sleeves and set off in all directions, disappearing into the

darkness with a soft buzzing sound. "Until they come back though, let's just set up camp and ration what food and water we have left." Everyone agreed and set up camp around the unmoving figure of Hikon, all hoping for some good news.

Several hours passed without any change to their situation, and everyone was growing increasingly nervous about the 'time' factor. They could not tell how much time had passed other than the fact that each time a flash died, they had to light another one in its stead. Four flashes had already been used, and the fifth one is about half way through.

The kikaichu bugs Shino had sent out hours ago had returned, all bearing the same message. 'There was no barrier, or edge, or wall. There was just a seemingly infinite land of blackness.' At this point in time, Shino finally accepted the truth - the Genjutsu did affect his bugs. Shino once again started feeling helpless and vulnerable like a newborn child; a feeling he was coming to hate with a passion (or as passionate as Shino would ever become). Now, all their hope for survival and continued journey towards the Chuunin Exam rest upon Hikon's small but strong shoulders. If only she could wake up and do something. The silence and non-action were driving everyone up the proverbial wall. The tension in the air had become so thick; it was almost as dense as vapour had it been visible.

A half hour later, Hikon finally made some sort of motion. She groaned as she came back to herself, body aching at having been set in the same posture for hours on end without any movement. Not only that, she was exhausted after spending so much time mentally traversing through her own body's chakra system, including her own mind, in order to analyse how the Genjutsu affected her. Once her analysis had been completed, Hikon immediately started to alleviate some of the symptoms she was experiencing due to the Genjutsu. It was a painfully slow process and drew on every ounce of her perfect chakra control. But the results were worth it, now she was one step away from completely dispelling this Genjutsu. Unfortunately, Hikon

was dangerously close to chakra exhaustion, having spent what her mind thought was close to five hours continuously working, but her real body had produced a constant stream of chakra manipulation for the past five days.

The soldier pill offered by Chouji was an absolute godsend to Hikon, who took it with a nod of gratitude. Taking another second to resettle her chakra-depleted body, Hikon took this opportunity to tell the others of her findings. "I've finished my analysis of the Genjutsu. It is..." Pausing for effect, Hikon tried to find the right words. "Nothing I have ever encountered before."

"What does that mean exactly?" Ino asked, completely bewildered by the situation and not liking the helplessness it left her feeling either.

"We really are 'stuck' in a Genjutsu container. When we were sucked through the black whole thingy some time ago, we were literally transported into someplace else, not a different dimension or a different plane, but somewhere that is sealed away from the outside world. And it is the sealing jutsu that keeps us trapped here, wherever here is - a tomb of eternal darkness. What the high level Genjutsu does however only enhances our caged situation. The Genjutsu slows down our real body's metabolisms, making it sleep in cryogenic suspension, as if time had stopped moving or is moving very slowly. That's why so much time has passed us by and we can't feel it. The Genjutsu also attacks our mind, making us believe that we are trapped in a place that has no borders; when in actuality, we're probably just stuck in a small room. That's the gist of the affects anyway." Hikon paused and drank a bit of water to sooth her dry throat.

"So far, I've managed to disrupt the flow of the Genjutsu affects on my real body, I can feel that it's slowly waking up. Not only that, but I can also sense our surroundings better. We aren't trapped in an infinity of darkness. I can almost feel the walls that surround us." Hikon stated calmly as she stood up onto her feet, taking time to stabilise herself first before reaching a tentative hand forward. Her

hand touched what seemed to be thin air, but then she clutched something. It looked almost like shadow, but it was real, it was firm and smooth like silk. Hikon looked as if she had touched the very fabric of darkness, reality or time.

Suddenly, Hikon unceremoniously yanked her clutched hand sideward in a pulling manner, and the strange black thing that she had grasped was pulled along with her. In an instant, a surge of blackness engulfed everyone before it completely disappeared, revealing bright lights in its wake. It took everyone several moments to get reacquainted with the light, and have their eyes adjust to the brightness of their surrounding. While Chouji and Ino cheered in the background at having escaped the darkness, both Shino and Hikon knew that it wasn't over yet.

Having their eyes finally adjusted to the light, everyone looked around at the circular room they found themselves in. There was a line of small window-like holes travelling in a ring shape in the upper regions of the room, but the holes were so small that they would not be able to fit through. Not to mention Hikon explained that a massive seal shielded the entire place, and stopped them from being able to escape.

It was then that Shino had an inspiration. "How about I have my bugs absorb the chakra used in the sealing system, so that we can weaken it enough to escape?" He asked Hikon as she was the resident Genjutsu specialist.

Hikon frowned in indecision though. "I'm not that good with seals. If Samure was awake then he would probably be able to find a way out of here, but I personally don't know whether that would work or not."

"Why don't we just cut our way out?" Ino asked as she pulled out her trusty sword, something she hadn't had much chance to use since the start of their journey.

Hikon could only shrug at the suggestion. "As I said, I don't know what kind of affect it would have on the seal."

"Let's at least give it a try!" Daiku called out encouragingly at everyone and they soon agreed that they really had no choice but to give it their all. Shino called forth his Kikaichu bugs again. And since they were no longer under the influence of the Genjutsu, it was easy for Shino to command them to find the chakra energies they seek and absorb as much of it as they could. Ino too, readied herself in a standard swordsman's stance, waiting for Shino to give the signal that his bugs had absorbed as much Chakra defences the seal had as possible. Soon, the bugs had their fill, and Shino nodded firmly towards Ino.

Without further ado, Ino raised her sword above her, concentrated her chakra to make it even sharper than it originally was, and gave a warriors cry as she lunged and sliced at the room's walls. The effect was instant, another set of blinding light erupted from the cut caused by Ino. This time, the light was so bright it engulfed everyone in the room. All the genins could feel a sudden pulling sensation and then it was gone, as quickly as it had appeared.

With a shallow groan, Daiku opened his eyes slowly, flinching at the bright sunlight that shone through the evergreen foliage above him. He blinked, confused as to what he was seeing before finally realising that he was outside, on the ground, with the trees and sky. He could even hear the singing of birds and the buzzing of various insects surrounding him. He was out of the Genjutsu sealed container. He was free. With a yelp of surprise and cheer, Daiku jumped to his feet only to find all his companions resting silently around him. He immediately went around to each member, rousing them from their supposed sleep, and soon, all Genins from team Asuma and Team Snow (with the exception of Samure once again) were ready to move off on their journey once more.

Frowning as he looked at the sun, Shino couldn't help but mutter in a low breath. "If what Hikari-san said was true, then we've already wasted enough time as is. Five days would have already passed with us sleeping trapped in the Genjutsu. We don't have much time

left, let's step up our speed of travel and gather our supplies as we go long, agreed?"

Everyone nodded resolutely, not willing to let this once in a lifetime chance of participating in the Kuunoki's special Chuunin Examination to pass them by. Readyng themselves, all the genins suddenly shot off towards the northern direction once more, determined to make it in time for the Chuunin exam.

Some distance away, Hikari was sitting nonchalantly on another branch in a tall tree, looking dismally at her once pristine Genjutsu container. The special sealing note (with the character for 'darkness' written on top) was sliced in two pieces, and there was a visible hole vertically across one side of the strange looking urn. Hikari sighed at the broken object.

"Well, I guess I'll give them a break. They've only got a few days left to get to the Kuunoki gates. Not to mention they'll have to climb the treacherous mountain pass. Ah, they'll be having enough trouble without me adding on to it." She muttered to herself half-heartedly. "Well, I can't say it wasn't fun." Hikari gave a whimsical smile as she reminisced about the time she trapped the Genins in her Genjutsu technique and how they had reacted.

End.

(1) I made it up. In the movie, I don't remember anyone specifically calling it those two names but it seemed fitting at the time when I was writing this chapter, so it's staying.

(2) For those of you who don't understand why Daiku and Hikon would follow Shino without question; that is because they have both already sensed the presence of the 3 Stone Ninjas. They just didn't do anything to show that they already knew.

(3) Yup, these three Ninjas are the same ones that appeared on episodes 150 to 151 of the Naruto Cannon Series - the Kamizurui Clan of the Hidden Stone Village. Just for references sake, Kurobachi is the big guy with a beard; Jibachi is the tall thin guy with glasses and Suzumebachi is the only female of the group.

(4) Having already fought the Kamizurui Clan before, Shino knows what they are capable of, therefore he tells them to avoid killing the fake bees as he doesn't want any of them to be trapped by the resulting honey (like Hinata had during the Cannon episode).

(5) From this point forth, any Ice type jutsus mentioned (with the only exception being Aisu Shin no Jutsu - this one is one of my original jutsus) were copied from the first Naruto movie. If you want a visual description of what they do, just re-watch the movie, I'm not going to spend all my time re-describing everything in detail.

(6) For those interested in looking at this odd ball of a thing, please go to my website unde the 'Miscellaneous' Gallery and you should be able to see it. For your information, this ugly little was inspired by 3x3 Eyes, of which had an urn that is similar looking to my description but slightly more complex.

(7) Anyone find this example familiar. I copied it from the first movie of Ghost in the Shell , when the Garbage man finally realised that his mind has been mind-hacked. Much of his memory has been faked; and much of his 'original' memory would be lost forever. It's a scary thought.

(8) Um, I've read somewhere that females can be called as 'kun' instead of 'chan' all the time, but I don't remember where. To me, it just wouldn't be proper to call Hikon 'Hikon-chan' even though physically, she is 'small'. It just doesn't match her serious personality, that's why I changed it to 'kun' instead. Hope I'm right.

Yeah! This chapter actually went quite fast, I hope I can get the next one finished as quickly as this one.

All the babble about high-level Genjutsu stuff... I made all of that up. There is absolutely no reference in the Naruto Cannon animation or manga books to support me. I just wanted to Genjutsu as dangerous as both Taijutsu and Ninjutsu. With this, I can.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter. Please review and tell me what you think.

Next Chapter: Sasuke, Kiba and Hinata face multiple onslaughts of strange and wacky creatures.

Chuunin Exam 1st Phase III

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Four: Chuunin Exam - First Phase III

" **Demon's talk** " / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ',
(FLASHBACK), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: OOC, PG-13. A chapter completely focused on Team Kurenai. Some swearing and lots of action!

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 24

Having escaped the strange, spirit-like grey wolves just the previous day, all three members of Team Kurenai were exceptionally cautious during their travels for the next few days.

Three days of constant journeying had brought the team many hundreds of miles away from the swampy environment that Jubei had initially dumped them. The three Genins now find themselves walking across a grassy plain, with very few trees but at least they

had a clear sky ahead of them. Without the depressing and wet atmosphere surrounding them, the three Genins now felt much better with a lighter mood. This was why the assault on their team happened too abruptly and took everyone by surprise. They simply weren't expecting it.

A giant bird in the form of a brown eagle suddenly swooped down from the once clear blue sky directly onto the group. Literally coming out of nowhere, its huge claws rapidly grasped at and clasped tightly around Akamaru (who had been walking on the ground beside his master). The large eagle then swooped off again into the air, taking the whimpering and frightened dog with it. Suffice to say, Kiba was outraged even while all three Genins were shocked by the entire event. Their guards were completely down, having thought that while travelling in such an open plane of grassland, they would be able to see an enemy coming a mile away. They were wrong.

The team had no warning whatsoever; even with Hinata's Byakugan eyes, the bird simply moved too fast for the Genins to react. And by the time they finally realised what had occurred, the bird and dog were almost hundreds of metres away in the air, disappearing into the horizon as every second passed.

A second of uncertainty later, all three members of Team Kurenai sped off in the direction of the bird's flight, desperately (in Kiba's case) tracking down the giant bird and kidnapped dog.

Hours of flight bought the genin team no where closer to their target, of whom had completely disappeared into the wilderness.

"Slow... Slow down, Kiba-kun!" Hinata huffed tiredly as she continued to run after her two teammates. Kiba had always had the most amount of stamina in their original team, so it wasn't unexpected that he could still run at such speed even after 4 hours of constant sprinting. Coupled with Sasuke's natural speed and endurance, Hinata was left feeling she was the most out of shape in their entire team, even though she had the best Chakra control.

"Just a little bit further, Hinata-chan. I can almost smell Akamaru! He's really close!" Kiba kept his senses peeled for any and all scent of his beloved dog, not that it was easy. The frightful pet had peed itself almost constantly since its capture, leaving a trail of musty animal scent in which to lead his true master to its location. Kiba was desperate, and his desperation brought him strength and endurance. He was not willing to lose his pet, not now and not ever.

It just wasn't fair. / *How come Akamaru's always the one to get hurt?* / Kiba had sworn an oath to himself during the rescue-Sasuke incident that he would keep his canine companion safe no matter what. / *And now look at me, my dog has been kidnapped by a flying eagle, ready to be eaten alive and I just stood there like an idiot!* / Mentally berating himself with all the curse words Kiba had ever known, the dog boy was completely immersed in the goal of getting his faithful companion back. / *Please don't let me be too late! Please don't let Akamaru be eaten already! Please don't let me be too late!* / He pleaded with any God that was willing to listen, silently begging fate to have mercy on his precious friend.

After 4 hours of desperate chasing, the members of Team Kurenai found themselves climbing the very steep walls of a giant granite mountain. Their goal was to reach the large bird's nest that rested on top of a jutted out ledge from the mountain side. Even from this distance they could see the enormous bird that had attacked their group earlier that morning, and the sight alone made Kiba's blood boil. However, from that distance, they were unable to see any sight of Akamaru.

Using their chakra manipulation skills, they made their way directly up the steep and dangerous mountain towards the newly built nest. Here was the time for Hinata to outshine her male team mates. For once, she was glad with her Hyuuga training she had one of the highest level of chakra control any Genin were able to reach. Concentrating chakra onto her feet, Hinata practically flew up the mountain slope in a vertical line directly towards their target.

Upon finally reaching their target's lair, the giant eagle roared in anger at being intruded. It flapped its massive wings rapidly, creating large gusts of wind blasting directly down at the still climbing Genins. Both Sasuke and Kiba had to pause in their rock climbing, lodging themselves as firmly as they could onto the rough mountain walls with their chakra. Hinata however, simply held one of her palms directly out, using her own Chakra to form an invisible chakra shield, she managed to push the assaulting winds away from her face. Though her speed slowed down drastically, Hinata still managed to move forward towards their target nonetheless.

Figuring that its wind attacks weren't working, the eagle avoiding a kunai that was flung towards it by Hinata, jumping into the air, it stretched its massive wings apart, taking flight away from the three humans that had invaded its home.

Pulling herself over the edge of the cliff, Hinata quickly turned around and had her hands stretched down, trying to reach her teammates and pull them up. Sasuke reached her first and was the second person (next to Hinata) to climb over the cliff's edge and onto the ledge where the nest was located. Turning around again to reach for Kiba's hand, Hinata suddenly noticed that the giant eagle in the sky was not yet ready to give up its prey. The flying monstrosity launched itself directly at Kiba, who was still climbing his way up since the dog boy had the worse chakra control within his team.

"KIBA-KUN! WATCH OUT!!!" Hinata shouted in warning but it was too late to react. Kiba turned his head and watched in horror the giant bird's tough beak slammed into his sides, crushing him against the hard mountain side. He felt several of his ribs snap due the impact, his lungs squeezed to the point where he literary couldn't breath, to the point where he almost fell unconscious. That was when the bird flew back and away from the disorientated boy, ready and waiting to launch a second attack.

Kiba released a hiss in pain as his world darkened abruptly, both due to the pain and sudden lack of oxygen. His chakra control was

completely whacked and without it, Kiba could feel himself slipping backwards into free fall.

"KIBA-KUNNNNNN!!!!" Hinata could only scream in agony as she watched her team mate and friend fall backwards possibly into his death. Mentally, she cursed herself for not moving fast enough, for not seeing the enemy before it attacked, for not doing more to save her friend. But all her chastising was useless as it did nothing to help the situation.

While Hinata was wailing mentally and physically, Sasuke had prepared for a contingency plan as he quickly analysed the bird's intension and approach, having activated his Sharingan some time ago. Pulling out a kunai and strings, Sasuke immediately launched his weapon (with the string attached) towards Kiba as the dog boy slowly fell backward. Manipulating the string with chakra enhancement, Sasuke successfully wrapped the kunai around Kiba's torso before quickly pulling the string taut, catching the falling genin in its grips swinging slightly in mid air.

Squawking in indignation at having its attack countered, the giant eagle launched itself at the unconscious boy swinging in the wind once more. This time, without being told by her team mates, Hinata instantly readied herself in defending her friends. She launched all her weapons towards the giant eagle. Kunai after kunai, shuriken after shuriken, and even some senbons as time passed; Hinata continued to keep the giant bird occupied as Sasuke concentrated completely on pulling the unconscious Kiba towards the ledge. When Kiba was finally pulled over the cliff's edge to join his team mates, the boy had regained some consciousness. He groaned in pain as his cracked ribs were jostled unceremoniously with the movement.

Having completely ran out of weapons by this time, and not being very proficient at long distance combat, Hinata could do nothing else but switch sides with Sasuke – letting the last Uchiha member to take care of the giant bird while she took care of their injured comrade.

Not wasting any time, Sasuke quickly prepared one of his favourite seals of all time. "Katon! Gokakyuu no Jutsu! (Fire Element! Grand Fireball Technique!)" The giant fireball whizzed through the air with the giant bird just barely dodging the incoming attack, squawking in panic.

Deciding that he needed to restrain the bird first before he could truly defeat it, Sasuke pulled out a few shuriken and strings of his own before performing another set of hand seals. "Katon! Housenka no jutsu! (Fire Element! Fire Flower Technique!)" The last of the Uchiha breathed out several smaller fireballs in different directions all around the giant bird, trapping it within a specific angle in the air. Not finished with his attack yet, Sasuke released the fire that gave the Housenka technique its name, revealing that behind the flashy display were deadly shuriken projectiles and each of the Shuriken were attached with strings that Sasuke still held within his very teeth. Pulling the strings together in a complex fashion, Sasuke successfully wrapped his strings around the surprised bird, completely trapping it at the boy's mercy. Quickly finishing off his last set of seals, Sasuke breathed out one of his most powerful Katon jutsus. "Katon! Ryuuka no Jutsu!"

The intense heat and fire followed the path of the strings before erupting at its end where it collided with the giant eagle's flesh. The monstrous bird roared mightily in pain and agony, its screech echoing through out the lands and almost deafening all the Genin's ears. However, with its wings still strapped by the strings and unable to fly, the bird could find no escape. With one final screech, reaching a crescendo not yet reached before, resonating and almost bursting the genin's human ear drums, the bird finally fell silent and died within the inferno of Sasuke's technique.

Beside Sasuke, Hinata worked diligently in healing Kiba's cracked ribs and some internal punctured organs. With her Byakugan activated, it was easy for Hinata to find all the internal injuries that Kiba had sustained through out the fight. And having trained under

some of the best Medical Ninjas Konoha had ever produced (Shizune and Tsunade); Hinata was quickly working her way up to becoming one of the best Medical Ninjas herself.

Shuffling slightly and feeling rather useless himself, Sasuke couldn't help but ask if there was something he could do to help.

"Sasuke-kun, can you please go and see if Akamaru is okay? I know that Kiba-kun would be more worried about Akamaru than himself if he had been any more lucid." Her calm but tense words reminded Sasuke of why they were following in the path of the monstrously large bird in the first place – it had kidnapped the team's dog.

Scurrying back towards the large nest, Sasuke awkwardly called out the dog's name, hoping that it would recognise his voice and call out to him as well.

The nest was large, as large as a five metre square room, with loads of junk present. He found what remains of a large buffalo – its skin and fur wilted under the sun's light and the stench was almost too overwhelming. He found what was left of a large bear, its paws and bones still in tack, but nothing else remained. Calling out Akamaru's name again, Sasuke strained his ears to hear for any movement or sound, anything at all that would indicate the ninja dog had not shared the same fate as these two animals.

Suddenly, a soft whining voice could be heard some distance to his right, and Sasuke immediately shifted his eyes (now back to their normal black colour) towards the origin of the sound. "Akamaru?" He called out again as he moved slowly towards the sound.

A second soft whine followed in his wake.

Climbing up, over and out of the giant nest, Sasuke then crouched down onto his hands and knees. Bending his head towards the hard ground, Sasuke peered into the darkness of a small hole hidden to the side of the mountain ledge. "Akamaru? Is that you?" Hoping he

wasn't talking to some sort of snake or deadly creature, Sasuke waited patiently for some sort of answer. He didn't have to wait long.

A happy puppy-yelp erupted from the darkness of the small hole, and Sasuke was slammed by something small but powerful, forcing him backwards onto his back. Howling happily at being rescued, the rather dirty but unharmed Akamaru slobbered Sasuke's face with its saliva, ecstatic that they had finally come and saved it from its ordeal.

"AHH! Get off! Get off Akamaru! Stop! STOP!!!!" Sasuke uncharacteristically yelled.

"Akamaru!?" Suddenly, Kiba's voice called out the other side of the nest. Hearing his beloved master's voice, Akamaru took no time at all to run over the nest (that was blocking its view of its master) and launched itself at Kiba. The both of them (boy and dog) howled happily at being reunited with each other, leaving Sasuke feeling rather disgusted at the dripping dog saliva on his face and neck, and also resulting in Hinata giggling in relief and amusement.

When everything was finally fixed and done (Kiba having been completely healed by Hinata but warned not to strain himself too much in the upcoming days), the three Genins made their way slowly but carefully down to the ground once more before moving off in the direction of their destination – the Kuunoki no Sato.

"Don't worry, Swee Loon. You did great." Maya patted the giant brown eagle on the head. "I'm glad that we managed to substitute your real body with a fake one in just the nick of time. We wouldn't want you to have your beautiful feathers burnt, now would we?" A rhetorical question, Maya didn't expect any reply and the bird certainly couldn't reply back in any human form.

Continuing to pat the giant bird and ruffle its feathers gently, calming down the magnificent creature from its vicious fight with the genins just hours prior, Maya continued to speak softly. "There... there, you

did a great job of scaring them, Swee. You deserve a long break. Go home and rest now."

With a graceful bow (as graceful as a giant bird could), the creature exploded into a massive swarm of white clouds, completely disappearing from the area. Maya then turned her attention away from her now deceased summoned creature and looked back at the team she was suppose to test.

"Hinata-chan did better than I anticipated. And the Uchiha was better than expected as well; he's dangerous, I'll have to get rid of him first." Mumbling to herself, Maya couldn't help but feel that she's starting to become more and more like Jubei-san, his sadistic nature really was rubbing off on her the more she spent time with him. / *Not good... definitely not good.* / She thought to herself, as she imaged herself standing with Jubei's arrogant stance, and laughing in an insane manner.

Early next morning, Kiba and Hinata consulted their map one more time before decided that their course of direction is still the fastest way for them to reach Kuunoki, just cutting across a small part of the Hidden Cloud territory. Having packed up all their equipment, the three Genins and Ninja dog started off on their journey once more.

They travelled steadily and on an even pace, making great distance. By Kiba's estimation, if their luck lasts, they should be able to reach the Kuunoki within a few more days of travel. "Yeah! It's gonna be great! We'll be the first group to get there, won't we Akamaru!" Kiba cheered and his pet dog yelped in agreement. Beside him, Sasuke could only roll his eyes and Hinata giggled at their enthusiasm.

The day passed quickly and soon team Kurenai found themselves setting up camp once more. This time, they took extra precautions, setting up some traps around their camp in order to warn them of any enemies. The three Genins set up a watch schedule, with Kiba and Akamaru on first watch, Hinata on second watch and Sasuke on last watch through out the night. They were not taking any chances

any more. However, even with all the precautions that Team Kurenai had taken for their own protection, they were still taken by surprise during the next assault.

It was during Sasuke's late night watch that the surprise attack happened. The night was quiet and peaceful, giving no sign of the approaching creatures about to strike. All of a sudden, Sasuke felt a wave of air cross his form, the camp fire flickered dangerously in the abrupt wind, and then the impact from an invisible hit was felt.

Sharingan flaring into life, Sasuke instinctively ducked under another invisible wave of movement that swayed the air directly above his head. He still couldn't fully make out whatever was attacking him; the Sharingan could barely detect the vibration of air movements and through that, predict an incoming attack, but the physical being itself remained invisible. And the fact that he was completely blind to it... scared the Uchiha heir more than he would dare to admit.

Screaming for his team mates to wake up from their peaceful slumber, Sasuke stumbled over what he was going to tell them. "There are things! .., Invisible things moving around camp, we've got to be careful!"

Akamaru barked in fright as it warned its master that it couldn't smell anything, there was simply nothing in air for it to smell. However, he could feel the vibrations beneath his feet. Whatever it was that was moving around weighted a lot, and it was moving towards them again. Hinata wasn't fairing much better either. Even with her all seeing eyes, she couldn't detect even a glimpse of chakra. For once in her life, the Byakugan were completely useless in finding or seeing its target. Like Sasuke, she was feeling incredibly unnerved at their current situation. After all, how do you fight an opponent you can't see?

But nonetheless, that's what the members of team Kurenai found themselves having to do in order to survive. Hearing another rustle of leaves and stomping on the ground, all members of team Kurenai managed to dodge another invisible assault. Taking the chance,

Sasuke drew a few kunai and threw them forward towards the seemingly open space. The kunai were instantly repelled away by a blast of air, at the same time, a loud shrieking voice rang through out the clearing, scaring all the genins and even Akamaru.

"What the hell?" Kiba could only mutter under his voice when he was suddenly smashed into by something that felt scaly and cold. The invisible swinging appendage knocked into the dog boy forcefully, throwing him against a near by boulder in which Kiba ungracefully smashed into.

"KIBA-kun!" Hinata cried out in worry. Feeling angry that she had not been able to protect her friend as well as feeling rather useless even with her Byakugan activated, Hinata decided to try a move that Neji had taught her some time ago, but one she was not very confident in using. Thrusting her opened palm forward, Hinata inhaled as she condensed a large amount of chakra into her hand before releasing it in one single blast. "Hakke Kuushou! (Eight Trigrams: Vacuum Palm)"

The blast of air and chakra impacted against something big and solid. The 'something' was forced backwards several metres, leaving large trenches on the ground indicating how it had dug its legs into the ground before the blast had hit. From the marks Hinata could tell that whatever this creature was, it had four legs - huge, clawed legs. A second after the blast, a wavering affect appeared before the members of team Kurenai, like someone had suddenly turned on and off a few flickering purple lights before them. And during that one second of shimmering, it was revealed to the Genins what exactly they were facing.

Huge lizard like creatures, their scales were blackish purple in colour, long leathery noses with a long forked tongue slipping in and out like snakes. It had a long and thick spiked tail like a dinosaurs. It was tall, around two and a half metres in height. But more importantly, it was long - from head to the very tips of its tail, the lizard was easily six to seven metres long. Another scary aspect about these creatures was their beady red eyes, glowing in the

darkness like unholy light, sending shivers down all the genins backs. Once again, team Kurenai finds themselves fighting some really odd and scary creatures.

"Holy shxt!" Kiba muttered softly. Beside him, Akamaru barked in agreement.

Another unholy roar escaped the creature's mouth shook the Genins out of their shocked states, just before the giant lizard turned completely invisible once more.

"Quick, we've got to attack while it's still preoccupied! Akamaru!" With his pet jumping securely onto his back, Kiba quickly preformed his favourite jutsu. "Juunin Bunshin!" The two Kiba clones then performed the Gatsuuga, intending to attack the creature while they still had an idea of where it was standing. Kiba and Akamaru successfully hit the invisible lizard by the side of its head, forcing the creature to roar in pain as well as reappear again.

Now that the giant lizard is visible once more, Sasuke quickly created a set of seals before breathing in deeply. "Gokakyuu no Jutsu!" The large fireball escaped Sasuke's lips, blasting and burning the lizard while Kiba and Akamaru managed to dodge out of the way just in the nick of time. The lizard released another ear piercing screech into the air, its vibrations echoing among the Genin's sensitive ears.

Suddenly, another rustle of bush was heard from the team's right, but before they had any chance to react, Sasuke abruptly felt something bite deeply into his right arm. Sharingan flaring into life, he still couldn't see exactly what had bit him. However, Sasuke was able to see his own blood dribbling out of the stinging wound and saw perfectly how black beads of poison was feeding into the puncture wounds. The instant the black substance contacted against his skin, Sasuke couldn't help by scream out in agony. It was burning, a painful smouldering affect. It felt like his skin, and now his veins were on fire. The pain could almost compare to what he felt when he was first pierced by Orochimaru's fangs during the curse seal episode.

Sasuke screamed again as he felt the jaws around his arm clamped harder, almost to the point of breaking his arm completely off and shattering his bones at the same time.

"Hakke Kuushou! (Eight Trigrams: Vacuum Palm)" The blast of air and chakra somehow managed to disengage the second invisible lizard's jaws from Sasuke's limb. Luckily for the Uchiha, the impact of the blast upon the creature only managed to disorientate the lizard, enabling Sasuke's arm to be freed without much trouble. Had the creature held on more tightly, Sasuke's arm may have been ripped off altogether. "Kiba-kun! We have to get out of here now!" Hinata shouted as she quickly rushed forward and grabbed the now dizzy and pained Uchiha.

"Right." Throwing down several smokebombs in order to create a chaos of smoke and dust, Kiba, Hinata and Akamaru used this distraction to escape the lizard's sight while dragging their injured comrade with them.

Two days on the run lead the members of team Kurenai far, far away from where they had originally set up their campsite. However, all this travelling had taken a large toll on all the genins and even Akamaru.

After two days of hard running, Kiba was exhausted having been the one who carried an unconscious and still in pain Sasuke upon his back. Beside him, Akamaru looked dirty and rough-housed, like he hadn't taken a bath in ages. Standing in front of him, Hinata didn't look much better. Her normally white jacket was covered in dirt, hair disarrayed and Byakugan eyes tired. She too was exhausted having to carry all three backpacks of her teammates, even though they had abandoned many of their things during the first invisible assault by those strange lizard creatures.

Finally finding a defensible cave to make their camp, Kiba slowly dropped the bemoaning Uchiha upon their sole sleeping bag. While the dog boy and pet walked out in order to set up multiple traps and

alarms in case of intrusion, Hinata took this chance to properly look over their injured comrade. What she found disturbed her. The lizard that had bitten Sasuke had definitely poisoned the once strong Uchiha. That told her that these lizard creatures all carried deadly venom, so on their next contact, both Kiba and herself would have to be careful to avoid any bites.

Shaking her head and concentrating on the situation at hand, Hinata activated her Byakugan once more. Pressing one hand upon Sasuke's shoulder (the one connected to his bitten arm), Hinata raised her second hand into the air. While her Byakugan eyes enabled her to see where exactly the poison had penetrated Sasuke's skin, organs and veins, she used her superior chakra control and knowledge over medical Ninjutsu in order to force the invading poisons out of her team mate's body (1). The hand on the shoulder pulsed as it released chakra into Sasuke's blood streams, these invading chakra then sought out the deadly poison flowing through out the Uchiha's body before pushing it towards the original bite wound. From there, her second hand (still up in the air) started acting like an artificial suction - pulling at, attracting and absorbing the poisons out of Sasuke's battered body. Once Hinata was sure that she had gotten most of the poison out of her team mate's body, she quickly stored the poison into a portable glass container she had taken along with her, stored within one of the sealed scrolls she carried upon her body.

These equipment carrying sealed scrolls were something of an invention taught to Hinata by both Naruto and Tenten. Both of her friends had continuously encouraged her to learn how to use scrolls in order to seal and carry her medical equipment and remedies. After all, it's not like she could fit a microscope in her backpack wherever she goes on a mission. And for once, she was ever grateful for her friend's encouragement, for had they not badgered her into learning how to use these scrolls, she may have found herself in a terrible situation, unable to help Sasuke at all.

A few minutes passed while Hinata spent the time cleaning the wound before placing some healing ointment and then wrapping the injuries up with pristine white bandages. By that time, Kiba and Akamaru had returned announcing that they had set up some advance perimeter traps followed by a few bell alarms that surround their current locations. "If those freaky creatures try to show up again, at least this time, we won't be taken by surprise!" Kiba told Hinata with deadly confidence. This time, he wasn't taking anything by chance.

"Good." Hinata nodded. "Because I don't think we'll be able to move for at least another few days. I've taken out most of the poison in Sasuke-kun's body but there is still some left that has already attacked his organs and mind. I'll need a few days time to analyse the properties of the venom before trying to create an antidote to counteract the poison still within Sasuke's body." She explained while she summoned forth all the equipment she needed for the next few days from her trusty scroll. Finally the set up had been completed, leaving Hinata to simply place a small dab of the venom before her microscope. With Hinata working diligently on one side of the cave, Kiba moved off to the other side of the cave before collapsing onto the ground and drifting off into an uneven sleep. Akamaru, following in its master's footsteps laid down beside Kiba and took a well-deserved rest as well.

While Hinata worked and Kiba slept, Sasuke's was having an internal battle within himself. Hinata may not have known this but one of the poison's main affects was to cause its victim to suffer hallucinations. It didn't take long before Sasuke was fumbling, moaning and turning in his disrupted sleep, trying desperately to escape what nightmares his mind had been caught in.

xxx XXX xxx **(Sasuke's mind scape - under hallucinations)**
(Warning: inclusive of jump scenes)

(2) Young Sasuke quivered on his knees, his tear streaked face was pale beyond the whiteness of the moon, his eyes gazed blankly,

horrified at seeing and hearing the words that slipped through his once idolised older brother.

" You can awaken the same Mangekyou Sharingan as me..." Itachi spoke in a soft, monotone voice, gentle but deadly. "However, there is a requirement." Pausing for effect, Itachi soon continued with the rest of his explanation. "You must kill... your closest friend..."

Do you hate me, Sasuke?

(3) An older version of Sasuke slammed his Chidori charged arm into and all the way through the heart of his opponent. The man before him bled all over Sasuke's form, raining onto his face. However, the frozen, insane smirk upon Sasuke's face never wavered. This was what he lived for. It was for this moment that Sasuke had sacrificed all his time and energy working towards. Today... was the day he finally killed his older brother.

However, Sasuke was abruptly brought out of his musings by a shrill cry from behind him. "IIIEEEE! HANASE! (No! Stop!)"

" Please... don't hurt him..." Itachi's final words were whispered right into Sasuke's ears before the once foreboding man literary collapsed onto himself, leaning his entire weight upon his younger brother's shoulders. Unceremoniously, Sasuke ripped his arm out of his brother's chest, knowing that he had struck all the way through the man's heart and he would definitely NOT survive this fight. Twisting around, Sasuke glared hatefully at the person who had dared interrupt his long awaited vengeance.

Before him stood a boy of no older than 6 or 7, trembling upon the blood stained earth with absolute fear and a splice of pure, uncontrolled hatred within his mid-night black eyes. The boy had short black, spiky hair and wore a simple peasant's clothing. However, it was the eyes that captivated Sasuke. For in a split second, Sasuke noticed that those familiar black eyes turned blood

red, with two dots swirling around the central pupil. There was no doubt in Sasuke's mind that this boy carried the same blood as his brother and himself. This was an Uchiha, the last of his sacred clan, other than himself.

" Well... Well... Well... What have we here?" The insane smile had returned as Sasuke walked slowly and intimidating towards the fear-ridden boy. Finally reaching him, Sasuke lowered himself and gripped tightly onto the boy's throat, slowly rising to a standing position pulling the boy up with him. "Heh... The bastard actually dared to BREED?"

The boy, having finally recovered from his shocked paralysis had given totally into his young rage, kicking and struggling against Sasuke's formidable grip fruitlessly, chocking and screaming in protest.

" Do you hate me, little one? Do you hate me for killing your sire?" Sasuke asked in deathly cold voice. The boy spat back at him, rebellious to the extreme. Sasuke's smirk disappeared as he used his free hand to wipe the spit away. Tightening his grip, resulting in the boy whimpering in pain, Sasuke mercilessly activated his own Mangekyou Sharingan and induced the boy to suffer the effects of the Tsukiyomi, forcing the boy to relive his father's death for the next 48 hours straight.

The boy's resultant scream echoed through the entire clearing for several long minutes, before finally, the boy's young psyche collapsed, leaving the boy in a blank state of oblivion. Sasuke inched his way closer to the boy's ear and whispered to his nephew: "If you want to kill me... curse me... hate me... and live a long and unsightly life... Always run away and cling to your pitiful life. And some day... when you have the same eyes as me... come before me as an equal Sharingan user... only then shall we fight... only then will you honour your father's death."

With that said, Sasuke released the boy to drop onto the ground like a lifeless doll. He turned and left the scene of his brother's death,

feeling nothing but guilt and emptiness eating away at what's left of his soul. /This is what I've always wanted right? Then why... why does it feel as if nothing's changed... why does it feel as if I've accomplished nothing... maybe... maybe I should return to Konoha now and pay a tribute to my parents... just to tell them that I've fulfilled my oath finally.../ Sasuke never looked back towards the despondent form of his nephew, nor did he ever gaze back at the dead form of his brother. Nothing mattered to him now... nothing at all...

You look so much like me Sasuke...

(4) Eight-year-old Sasuke happily hugged his brother from behind, glad that today his oniisan was able to at least spend the afternoon with him, even if it meant carrying him around on his back because he was stupid enough to sprain his ankle. "When I grow up... I'll join the police force too!

" Hai... hai..." Itachi gave Sasuke a tired but amused smile in return.

Do you love me, Sasuke? Did you even know me...

(5) Sasuke stared dejected at his reflection upon the water's surface. "I wonder... what did you talk with mother about... father..." The boy muttered to himself half-heartedly. Sasuke slowly picked up a near by rock and dropped it into his reflection. The water rippled for a moment, before finally settling, leaving Sasuke to stare frozenly at the image of his brother reflecting off his original image. Gritting his teeth in sudden fury, Sasuke stood up and jumped into the lake itself, needing the almost freezing cold temperature of the water to cool his heated blood.

/Brother... no matter how deep I have to plunge myself into darkness, I will do it in order to kill you! No matter what happens I will get that

power/ Sasuke swore to himself as he sank deeper and deeper into the darkness of the abyss that surrounded him.

Do you hate me enough to kill me, Sasuke?

In the only photo depicting his whole family that Sasuke had saved since his clan's massacre, the image of Itachi stared back at the viewer, smiling gently, as if he was sharing a secret with the viewer only. It was a gentle smile, a welcoming smile, a beautiful smile...

Or do you love me too much to kill me?

Sasuke snapped awake with a gasp, eyes wide with incomprehension, body soaked with sweat and tense with stress. His arms shook as his breathing continued to be erratic, reflecting the same unstable beating of his heart. / *It was a dream. Just a dream. Just a dream. Just a dream.* / He mentally repeated to himself like a mantra saving him from insanity.

"Hoe! (6) Sasuke-kun! You're finally awake, I was getting worried." Hinata's soft but visibly strained voice echoed from his right.

Turning his head towards her, Sasuke was surprised to see her disordered state. She looked really filthy and tired. Her hair was disarrayed, there was mud upon her face, her fingers were also caked with dirt, scratches and general uncleanness. Her clothes were not much better. Her once pristine jacket had had its sleeves torn so Hinata now wore a sleeveless jacket over her usual black shirt. Her normally long pants too had been cut across her knees, making them much shorter than he was use to. Overall, she just looked exhausted, as if she hadn't slept well in weeks.

Bringing his attention back to her original words, he struggled against his dry vocal chords before managing to utter some words.

"What... do you mean? How long was I out? What happened?" He frowned in confusion as for the life of him - he couldn't remember what had happened.

Hinata's gaze turned sorrowful with guilt. "You were bitten by the Tokage (Lizard) (7). They have poison glands inside their fangs and so the venom was injected straight into your bloodstream through your arm's veins. Both Kiba and I retreated, taking you along with us. But I... I waited too long to administer you... I didn't think that you had been poisoned until it was too late. I took out as much of the poison I could, but by that time, it had already affected your organs and mind. It doesn't seem to do much physical harm exactly, but it does cause you to hallucinate. It's been close to 5 days now since you were bitten, and through out that time, you were moaning and groaning in your sleep. Because of your agitation, we haven't been able to feed you much other than water now and again. You're extremely weak at the moment." Her explanation was stuttered now and again, not by her shyness, but by her guilt for not doing better.

"Fi... Five days?" Sasuke's eyes widened at the implication. He had been asleep for five days...

"Hai. We've since moved camp four times, travelling by day and setting complicated camps at night. But even with those precautions, we had met up with the Tokage twice and have just barely managed to escape them each time. It was during the last battle that I managed to collect a sample of the anti-venom from the scales of the Tokage. And from there, I was able to make a cure for you. Sasuke-kun, I'm sorry I underestimated the Tokage's power and let you suffer for the last few days. It was completely my fault." Hinata's head hung lowly. You could almost feel the vibration of guilt and self-hate emanating from her shoulders. Even Sasuke couldn't take the amount of depression radiating from his teammate.

"I don't blame you." He finally formed the words. "If it wasn't for you, I might have died or suffered even longer. I owe my life and sanity to you. Thank you for not giving up on me." He answered succinctly. His head turned away from her all seeing eyes as he knew there was

a small blush on his face. It wasn't that he felt anything particular for Hinata, but she had been one of the few people who had went out of their way to help him. And he wasn't use to needing help. So, as dictated by his Uchiha pride, he had to reciprocate some gratitude back. But more importantly, he was thankful that she hadn't abandoned him when he was incapacitated.

As if reading his mind, Hinata's next words pierced straight through Sasuke's soul. "I would never abandon a comrade." Her words were strong and full of conviction.

The awkward silence that followed the two was suddenly sliced by the introduction of a third voice. "Heh. Looks like sleeping beauty is finally up and about." Kiba's tired voice rang out from the opening of the cave.

"Kiba-kun, that's not nice." Hinata's disapproving voice immediately snapped, as if by automation.

Ignoring Hinata's outcry, Kiba simply watched his other teammate with sharp eyes, as if mentally cataloguing Sasuke's physical health. "Che. Enough. He's up and that's all that's important." Turning away from them, Kiba (with Akamaru following slightly behind) trudged towards the left side of the team before slumping onto the ground unceremoniously.

Looking over Kiba's form, Sasuke was again surprised by how exhausted and dirty his male teammate had become during his five days of comatose. Kiba had completely lost his favourite, hooded jacket. He now only wore a fishnet shirt (with holes visibly ripped in certain sections) and his normal dirt covered pants (also with rips and patches splattered in several places). On top of all that, both owner and dog smelled really bad, as if they hadn't even had time to take a bath or shower. But then again, considering their situation, Sasuke's couldn't blame them.

Mind wandering over the various bruises and wounds he could see upon his team-mate's bodies as well as the number of medical

patches and bandages, Sasuke couldn't help but feel guilt well up inside of him. / *They had sustained injuries in order to protect me...* / He thought to himself with a wave of confused feelings. "You know, you could have left me behind, I wouldn't have blamed you at all..." The words came out of Sasuke's lips abruptly, as if he had no control of his runaway mouth.

"We're different Uchiha, we don't abandon friends and we don't betray our allies. If you're in need, we'll do whatever it takes to help." Kiba snapped at Sasuke, his thoughts travelling back to the time when he and some of the other Rookie genins chased after the last Uchiha in an attempt to stop him from joining Orochimaru. The memories still stung and though they had become a team, he still couldn't forget the Uchiha's selfish act.

"Hai, friends stick together. Teammates help one another. We are a team, Sasuke-kun. We fight as a team and we'll win as a team." Hinata's softer but more encouraging tone of voice supported Kiba's biting remarks.

After a long silence and with an expression of wonder of his pale face, Sasuke finally answered. "... thank you..."

The next day, Sasuke had recovered enough to attempt the journey on his own strength once more. Even after five days of unrestful sleep with very little food and water, he would be damned if he didn't walk upon his own two feet. Sasuke was determined to find a way to repay his team mate's kindness and dedication to his care.

Slowly but surely, he was starting to learn the value of teamwork, he was starting to understand and appreciate the relationships he was building with both Hinata and Kiba, and even Akamaru. This was something new to Sasuke. For even during his time with Team 7, he had always done his best to distance himself from the rest of his team.

Sure, he had a deep, almost brotherly and sisterly bond with Naruto and Sakura, but over time, (and especially after his defection) they had grown apart - as if they lived in different worlds now. And since both Naruto and Sakura had become Chuunins, Sasuke felt even more depressed, distanced and alone. For the first time in a long time, he was no longer alone, and he could finally start rebuilding the bonds he had so carelessly rejected or broken previously. He swore silently to himself that this time wouldn't end up like last time. He wouldn't lose the precious people he had built those bonds with. He wouldn't betray these bonds that held his sanity together. For to do that a second time would surely result in his insanity, and he knew he would be unable to crawl his way out of the darkness of his soul once more. This is his second chance and he would not waste it.

However, his musings were abruptly broken off when three giant lizards (the aforementioned Tokage) suddenly revealed themselves some 30 metres in front of Team Kurenai, blocking their path inside the rocky canyon they had been travelling through. Trapped on both sides as well as the front, team Kurenai had only two choices, turn back and run, or fight.

Looking at his team mate's determined expressions, Sasuke took a brave step forward. He would not run, not anymore. This time he fights. Both Hinata and Kiba step forward beside him in support. Together, they stand as one. Together, they are a team.

Rushing forward and dodging the razor sharp fangs from the mouth of the giant lizard, Sasuke jumped up just in time to avoid the slashing tail from behind. Performing a summersault found Sasuke directly above the purple scaled lizard before he performed a quick hand seal and slammed his palm onto its dry scale-ly back as he descended. "Raikan Mahi no Jutsu! (Lightning Shock Paralysis)!" (8)

The surge of electrified chakra coursed through the giant lizard's body, numbing it and shocking it to the point of rendering it incapacitated. "Now, Kiba!"

"Let's go Akamaru! Gatsuuga!" The pair of Kibas (packing the most power) rammed their way into the side of the collapsed Lizard, literally drilling their way through into its side. Suddenly, they were able to break through the lizard's hard, scale-ly skin, penetrating its vulnerable muscles, bones, organs, veins and arteries. A large gush of blood and flesh met the dog boy's sensitive nose and after a split second more of piercing, both dog and owner decided that was enough to complete incapacitate their opponent before quickly jumping away from the blood scene.

The now downed lizard screeched a high piercing sound, demonstrating its agony and possibly calling for revenge. As if the screech was some kind of signal, the other two four-legged lizards suddenly shimmered into invisibility, leaving no trace of when they were currently located.

"Shxt." All three genins muttered at the same time, already feel the killing intent and oppressive tension in the atmosphere.

An inspiration suddenly struck Hinata as she looked around their surrounding, with this idea in mind she called out to her teammates as she stepped in front of the two boys. "Guys! Let me handle this."

"What?! No way Hinata!" Kiba cried in protest, already readying himself and his dog to perform their best technique. If only they could somehow manage to piss on the two invisible lizards, then it would make their aim perfect by performing the Soutourou (doubled headed wolf).

"I agree. You can't even see them enough to strike at them, what use is that?" For once, Sasuke was agreeing with Kiba. He just could not fathom any way that Hinata could possibly defeat the two invisible lizards in she couldn't see them.

"I don't have to see in order to hit them. Look. We're trapped on both our left and right sides by the cliff walls of this canyon, right?" Hinata snapped, already standing in her initial stance.

"Yeah, so?" Sasuke, having never seen Hinata in such a stance before, looked on in confusion. While behind him, Kiba was slowly coming to an understanding of what she intended to do.

"That means that there is no way for the Tokage to escape my jutsu, because my jutsu's range just so happen to span around the same length of the space between the two cliff walls that we're currently standing on. And unless the Tokage somehow manage to climb the walls to escape, they'll be unable to avoid my technique." Hinata answered confidently. "Therefore all I need you both to do is the drive them towards me and not let them climb up the walls."

"Oh." Kiba's eyes widened in understanding as he quickly pulled the still confused Uchiha some distance away from Hinata to up towards the canyon walls. "We'll leave it up to you then, Hinata. Give them hell!" He called out in encouragement.

With the plan set, all that the team required was to get on with it. "Katon! Gokakyuu no Jutsu!" Sasuke breathed fire from some distance away from Hinata, several metres behind where the two Tokage's had disappeared. The genins had assumed that the Tokage had not since run away from their presence, and as long as they were still within the canyon, they were within Hinata's divination.

As the giant fireball blasted its way across the canyons floor, two dark figures could be seen through the flames, and it was confirmed that the two living Tokages were still within the canyon. The immense heat of the fireball drove the Tokages to run towards Hinata's direction. Above them, Kiba and Akamaru were stuck (via chakra enhancement) to the walls of the canyon, ready and waiting to throw down boulders if the Tokage decided to climb up the rocky walls, that is if they had that ability to begin with.

With the Byakugan activated, before Hinata appears the green divination symbol of the Hyuuga Jyuken style (9). Lifting one hand towards her lips, Hinata paused slightly before continuing to raise her hand. Once her right hand was in a vertical position, she quickly swiped it downward in a vertical cut. Raising her left hand up from

her sides, she quickly swiped towards her right in a cross like fashion. Pulling both her hands down and performing the manoeuvre again, Hinata quickly builds up momentum as well as increasing her focus on her chakra. "Shugo Hakke! Rokujuu Yonshou! (Guardian of the 8 Divination seals: 64 Strikes)" With those words, she began to spin directly on the spot, shooting out thin lines of chakra from each palm. As her speed increased and her hand's motion continued, Hinata quickly created a large sphere of thing, laser like chakra lines protecting her within a 15 metre radius.

Ever since she had perfected this original move, inspired by the Hyuuga Jyuken style, Hinata had worked damn hard to increase its range of attack. Now, she had finally succeeded in causing the jutsu to affect (or attack) anything within a 15 metre radius of where she stood. This original move had become not only her ultimate defence but if used properly, it could possibly become an ultimate offensive move as well.

With the fire driving them one way, the Tokage simply had no choice but to try and ram towards where Hinata stood, and that's when they were met with the force of Hinata's new jutsu. The impact between the lizards and Hinata's ultimate defence lasted less than a split second, before both the Tokages were shredding quite literally before being blown backwards by the force of Hinata's Chakra.

Having jumped away just in the nick of time, Sasuke watched from his perch next to Kiba as the two Tokages reappeared once more as they slammed heavily against the rock walls of the canyon, instantly falling down for the count. After a few moments of silence, the only thing Sasuke could come up with was: "Wow..."

"Yeah sure is. No matter how many times I see her perform that move, it still sends chills down my spine every time." Kiba snorted as he gave a wicked smirk to his stunned teammate.

"How... how did she do that?" Sasuke couldn't help but see Hinata in a new light, almost with awe.

"Hinata combined her natural flexibility with her precise chakra control in order to create that move. Inspired by the Hyuuga Jyuuken, she worked hard with the nature of water and came up with this jutsu all on her own. This is her absolute defence. But more than that, she can have a complete range of attack as well, creating an almost absolute offence as well. It's a damn powerful technique, and I haven't found anyone that could defeat it yet." Kiba boosted proudly.

Sasuke could only nod numbly as both Kiba and himself jumped down to the ground to join their female teammate. Having finally defeated their staking opponents, the members of team Kurenai quickly set off on their journey once more. They only had a few more days before the deadline of the Chuunin Exams left after all.

"They didn't do half bad. I was impressed by the skills of all three, but more than that, I'm impressed that they worked together as a team. They have proven to me that they are worthy." Maya grinned behind her bandages. "After all, they actually managed to hurt some of my best summons, not an easy feat." She stated as she patted her loyal Tokage summons upon their heads - all three of whom were visibly healthy as if they had never been injured previously. "They deserve to pass this stage of the exam, but I don't know whether they will be as impressive in the next..."

(1) Sort of like how Sakura did it when Kankuro was hurt during the Naruto 2 manga's. For those of you who don't read the manga, just take my word for it, please.

(2) Flashback scene from when Sasuke witnessed his clan's massacre. Text copied directly from Restoration of Faith (Chapter 10)

(3) Made-up future for Sasuke. Text copied directly from Restoration of Faith (Chapter 10)

(4) Flashback scene from before the Uchiha clan's massacre. Text copied directly from Restoration of Faith (Chapter 10)

(5) Flashback scene from after the Uchiha clan's massacre. Text copied directly from Restoration of Faith (Chapter 10)

(6) Um... just an expression. After watching a bit of Card Captor Sakura, I think this kind of expression match Hinata's perfectly.

(7) Tokage literary means 'lizard'. I looked it up in the Dictionary.

(8) Man! It's been such a long time since I haven't used this jutsu, I've almost forgotten that I had it.

(9) The green symbol thing that always appears when Neji is performed the Hakke Rokujuu Yonsho.

Finally got this chapter out of the way! Yeah!

Chuunin Exam 1st Phase IV

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Five: Chuunin Exam - First Phase IV

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: This chapter will be mainly about Team Gai and it's all about 'fighting'.

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 25

Huffing and puffing, Tenten almost collapsed in exhaustion; considering she had spent the last 3 hours straight running at her top speed it was understandable how she had become so tired. Now, normally she could have kept this up for at least 5 hours or so. You do not become a student of Gai and not learn something about speed and stamina. She may not be as physically strong or as fast as either Lee or Neji, but she could still carry her own weight around.

However, considering that she and her teammates have been chased by a large crowd of Missing Nins all through the decrepit town throwing various projectiles and weapons at them, before they managed to find a hide out in an old, broken down barn, let's just say Tenten was not having a very good day. "We've... got to... find a way... out of this... place..." Her words came out truncated as she continued to huff and puff, dragging as much oxygen as possible into her lungs as she went along.

Neji leaned heavily against a half demolished pillar for support. He too, wasn't fairing much better than Tenten to tell the truth. At times like these, he hated the fact that as a Hyuuga, he really shouldn't be showing any physical weaknesses as is demanded by his own personal pride and the pride of his clan; but at this moment in time, he just couldn't find the energy to give a damn. It wasn't like his uncle Hiashi was going to pop out of no where and scold him on his shabby appearance.

Opposite him, Lee was breathing deeply with heavy beads of sweat surrounded his forehead. But unlike his other teammates, he was at least still standing. "Yosh! Now that was a good exercise!" Punching his fist in the air, Lee couldn't help but pull off a posture he had watched his beloved sensei pull off many times before – the nice guy pose tm. Neji and Tenten didn't even put an effort to reply. They were use to his eccentricity by now.

A few more minutes spent on recovering their breath and energy, Neji decided to take the lead and think about what their team had do from now on. "Well, I guess now's a good a time as any to look over the map, right?"

Pulling out the scroll that Jubei had given them what seemed like eons ago, Neji couldn't help but feel slightly hesitant in opening it. In all the time he had known and heard about his cousin, Neji knew Jubei was the kind of person who enjoys making the lives of other people as hard as possible. The man jus loves playing around with people's emotions. That was one of the reasons why Neji knew that

no matter how innocent the scroll looked, it had to have some sort of trick up its sleeve.

Just as he expected, the scroll opened up to reveal a blank page. Further unrolling of the scroll continued to reveal blank pages, there was simply nothing there to see.

"Huh... Did Jubei-san give us the wrong scroll?" Lee asked innocently, huge eyebrows knitting together in confusion. Neji gave a tired sigh before activating his Byakugan to have another look at the scroll's contents.

"There's chakra sealed within this scroll. I can see the intricate lines but can't make out the words." He murmured, the words heavily reassuring Lee that Jubei had not given them the wrong scroll by mistake. "Tenten, can you have a look at this?" Neji delegated the task to their team's only seal user.

Frowning at Neji for giving her the task of deciphering the empty scroll, Tenten bit back on the retort ready to escape her mouth. It's true that she was the only member of Team Gai who regularly uses seals and especially sealed scrolls, but considering she couldn't very well see the chakra on the scroll, it's not like she could decipher anything when she can't see it in the first place. However, general knowledge on all sealed scrolls dictate that to apply a seal on a scroll, you use either ink or blood to create the seal; to release or open the seal, you activate it via the use of blood. As such, Tenten simply bit her thumb and swiped it across the empty scroll.

Neji watched in silence as the blood interacted with the web of chakra, mixing and bleeding into one another. But strangely enough, the blood only mixed with one-third section of the web structure before stopping. "Each of us has to place a drop of blood in order to activate the seal." He analysed correctly.

Not questioning his teammate further, Lee quickly followed the instructions, biting his thumb and leaving a drop of blood on the once pristine white pages of the scroll. Neji soon followed and once

all three blood samples had landed on the scroll's paper surface, the reaction was immediate. The three genins of team Gai watched in silent amazement as the three-dimensional hologram flitted across their gaze, pinpointing where exactly the Kuunoki no Sato was located within the mainland continent. Having studied the scroll for a few minutes, Neji silently rolled it back up again, deactivating the hologram as he went along. "Well, now we just have to figure out where we are before we set off."

Activating his Byakugan again and adjusting the range to a few miles further than he would normally, Neji spied upon a road sign that was about half a mile away. He read the inscriptions written upon the sign and immediately memorised the name. Releasing his eyes once more, Neji told his teammates calmly that they were located near a place called Tanake village (1). "We should head westward since we're on the northern tip of the Fire Country and the Kuunoki is located on our west side."

"Yosh! To the Kuunoki, my friends! We will show them our dedication and the power of our YOUTH in no time!" Punching a second fist in the air, Lee couldn't help but jump up and down in excitement while his two teammates just watched in disgust, disbelief or amusement, depending on whatever mood they were in at the time.

"Right, we should wait until nightfall before we move from this place, it'll be easier for us to avoid the band of Missing Nins outside." Neji concluded logically and his other team members agreed. With that said; team Gai sat down, relaxed and waited until night fall before they started their journey towards their destination, the Chuunin Exam held at the Hidden Air Village.

"Hmm... What to do? What to do? I feel like seeing some extreme fighting..." Jubei murmured to himself as he lounged around on a large cushion, watching team Gai's progress from one of the ringed mirrors surrounding him. "... but I can't be bothered fighting them myself... maybe I should find someone else to do my dirty work for me... hmm... Missing Nins of Genin rank are too easy... How about...

Jounins?" Fidgeting now and again, Jubei unconsciously played with a small ring upon his fingers, twirling it and flicking it as he continued to think of an alternative to ease his boredom.

Snapping his attention to one of his special ring mirrors, he started asking the inanimate object as if it was a sentient being: "Find a group of Jounin hostiles for me to play with, please?" The ring rotated by itself in midair a few times before coming to a stop once more. This time, it no longer showed the progress of Team Gai; instead, it showed a group of what seems to be a band of Ninjas, led by three very distinct men.

"Hm." Jubei's smile turned into a sadistic smirk. "This will be fun!"

"It seems that the preparations are all complete, we should be able to take Nano Country without any problems." The largest of the trio of men sat on a large tree branch said with a superior tone of voice. Fatter and more muscular than the other two members, this man wore a low collared, aquamarine skin-tight shirt, with long fingerless gloves made of the same material. He also wore beige coloured baggy pants with a yellow cloth tie around his waist. He has long grey hair, yellow eyes and on his face were some strange curved strips upon each cheek like a tiger's face. Within his hand he held a mace attached through a metal chain to a small scythe.

"Indeed, soon we will become the Daimyo (Feudal Lords) of Nano Country. That is, once we kill off the current king and his only daughter." A second member of the trio said with a dark smirk on his face. "Say, aniki (Big Brother). Mind if I play around with the girl first before we kill her. I heard she's not bad looking herself. What's her name again? Haruka? Haruto? ..." This man had yellow eyes, long lilac hair, and strange tear drop marks on his pale cheeks with a very small triangular blue mark upon his chin. He was of average height but thin, wearing a green, skin tight sleeveless high collar shirt, with long fingerless gloves up to his biceps made from the same material. He also wore baggy light brown pants and a reddish cloth tie around his waist by a thick belt. His ninja shoes are also the same

aquamarine green colour as his shirt and gloves. Upon his hands he held two wooden, hand held Tonfas.

"Haruna. Do with her as you wish, as long as you kill her afterwards, I don't care what you do with her." The third member of the trio stated nonchalantly. His eyes peeled and focused upon the palace in the distant horizon. Taller than the other two members, this man wore the same aquamarine coloured shirt and gloves, but with a long purple jacket over it. He wore light blue pants covered by a long, white cloth and a thick yellow belt. He has long brown hair, yellow eyes and a darker skin tone; on each cheek of his face as well as his forehead was a curved purple tattoo (2). Behind the trio of Ninjas stood a band of 40 Shinobis, all ready and waiting to raid the small peaceful country of Nano.

"Looks like I caught you at a good time, neh?" A voice suddenly echoed from the trio's right side, a voice completely unfamiliar to them. Their reaction was immediate - the largest of the three threw his favourite weapon, a deadly looking mace attached through a metal string to a small hand held scythe towards the origin of the voice. The mace flew through the air at a rapid speed and if Jubei had not dodged in the nick of time, he would have found himself in a similar state as the tree that was behind him - completely obliterated. This all happened while the other members of the trio's Shinobi gang threw a barrage of shuriken and kunais at Jubei, all of which he dodged effortlessly. A few of the Ninjas came at Jubei with Katana's held high, ready to cut him into pieces.

Jubei yawned nonchalantly calling upon his rings to defend him automatically. Similar to Gaara's sand, Jubei's rings were sentient to a certain degree. They were able to protect him without his conscious manipulation of them. This can be done because when Jubei first created his rings, he had sealed a part of his soul within each and every one of them. The soul is a self-sustaining energy that has the ability to multiply if given enough power and directed to do so via seal manipulations. As such, Jubei created an absolute

defence mechanism when the construction of the rings was complete, with the ability to protect him without him ever asking it to.

"Yo! Calm down people! I'm not here to fight or kill you!" Jubei called out in amusement as he continued to watch the various ninjas try and find a way to kill him. / Yet. / He thought sardonically to himself.

"Enough." The tallest of the original trio called out loudly and all the Shinobis immediately halted their attack. Glaring at Jubei fiercely, the man grunted dangerously. "Who the hell are you and why are you here?"

Jubei gave the man a cheeky smile. "The name is Dokudes Jubei." Giving a dramatic bow Jubei continued. "I'm one of the 10 Gate Guardians of the Kuunoki Gakure no Sato, here on behalf of my village to ask for your assistance."

"What kind of assistance?" The youngest of the three men, the second who spoke before, asked in trepidation. By now many ninjas all over the world had heard about the involvement of the Kuunoki Shinobis during the last invasion of Konoha by the Sound. And if the rumours were to be believed, it would not be a wise move to go against any members of the Air community.

Jubei's smile continued to irritate and unnerve the people before him. "I need you all to test and possibly kill a team of Genins I'm suppose to proctor over during the special Kuunoki held Chuunin Exam, which is basically now." He stated charmingly.

A large sweat drop appeared on all three heads of the trio leaders. "Excuse me." The youngest one asked again. "Why would you want us, three powerful Jounins and a mass of Chuunin Ninjas, to go against a small team of 3 measly Genins? And if you're really a proctor of the exam, why would you want us to kill them? And one last question, why the fxxk are you asking *us* in the first place, can't you do it on your own or find someone else?" The general irritation in the air grew with each statement being uttered.

"Well, I suppose..." Jubei tapped a finger against his chin disarmingly before coming up with his own replies. "I want to test them beyond anything they've had to face before. Facing a large contingent of ninjas of Chuunin and Jounin rank would definitely fit that criterion. If they can't even survive a battle against you guys, then they probably won't be able to survive the extreme training regimes in the Kuunoki anyway. I'm not the type to cuddle anyone of any rank; if they can't cut it, then too bad for them. Battles to the death are usually the most entertaining battles to watch and I want this test to be as extreme as possible. As for why I chose you guys... well, why NOT you guys? You're here, you're free and you're easy to manipulate. Perfect candidates if you ask me." Jubei's smile turned ice cold.

In the second Jubei finished his speech, every single member within the band of Shinobis fell onto the ground clutching their necks in surprise and terror. Each of them, including the three leaders, had one of Jubei's rings wrapped tightly around their necks, suffocating them in the process.

"Now, if you are able to fulfil my request, I will set you all free. If not, well, let's just say you won't have much time to live." Jubei threatened charmingly, as if this was an everyday occurrence.

After Jubei's little speech, to say the trapped ninjas were furious was an understatement. While still fighting the slowing tightening effects of the rings round their necks, all three leaders of the Shinobi band started performing their own attacks in retaliation. The youngest looking one silently called for water particles from the ground to rise - and it started to bubble forth, condensing and merging together to create a large ball of water. The heaviest of the three managed to swing his mace around dramatically before flinging it towards Jubei's form once more. The tallest of the three and obviously the one in charge, created a small, almost invisible ice crystal before his opened palm. It captured the light being shone onto it via the sun and somehow managed to reflect it towards Jubei like a focused laser beam.

Four rings appeared out of no where and defended Jubei. One of the rings enlarged itself and completely swallowed the ball of water in midair, before plunging underground and enlarging itself once more, completely encasing the underground water supply from the Ninja's reach. A second ring allowed the mace to fly through its centre before contracting instantly, trapping the form of the mace before it could go further or retract back to its master. A third ring created a linked portal between itself with the last ring, creating a wormhole affect. The third ring allowed the laser to pass through its centre, swallowing the laser beam; the laser beam then came out from the centre of the other ring, located directly behind the three Shinobis, as such, their attacks were simply redirected against them.

"Now. Now. Let's not get too hasty. I do keep my word, you know. Help me beat those genins senseless or kill them, then I'll let you go. If you refuse, your nice throats will be sliced off right here, right now. I show no mercy to allies and enemies alike." Jubei answered with a shrug, completely unimpressed by the Ninja's retaliation techniques. In response to his mood, all the rings around the Shinobi's necks tightened even more, rendering a few of them unconscious due to lack of oxygen. "From my perspective, you really don't have much of a choice." Jubei's deadly calm words finally forced the three leaders to concede, lest they wish to die.

A few more minutes of threatening each other verbally, Jubei released the contracting of his rings, but did not take the rings off the Ninja member's neck as yet. "Pull this mission off and I'll take my rings away. Until then, you'll just have to put up with them. Remember, you're going after a Gennin Team from Konoha. One wears a horrible green spandex one piece suit with massively large eyebrows. Another is our typical Hyuuga with white eyes and long black hair. The third member – a female – has her hair up in two buns on each side of her head. She wears a traditional martial artist dress shirt and dark blue pants. Those are your targets. Don't lose." With those final words of advice, Jubei jumped and disappeared into another one of his transportation rings.

"Damn bxstxrd!!!" The largest of the three grunted in fury. "How dare he treat us like this?! Like we're some sort of toy for him to play with! How dare he..."

"SHUT UP! Jiga. That guy's one of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians. If he feels like playing with our lives, then there just isn't that much we can fxcking do about it!" The youngest of the three retorted, eyes blazing in anger and embarrassment at being defeated so easily.

"Watch your language, Ruiga! I'm the older brother here. If you don't keep a tighter grip on that ugly mouth of yours, I'm gonna..." The now named Jiga growled in a threatening manner.

"Enough, you two! I don't want to hear any more moronic comments out of your mouths." The third, older and taller member snapped and the two younger siblings shut their mouths instantly.

Giving a heavy sigh and a distracted tug on the ring around his neck, Ruiga asked his oldest brother for advice. "Oi. Renga. What the hell are we gonna do now? All our preparations for taking over the Nano Country have been completed. All we have to do now is strike. But with this interruption..." He trailed off, unsure of whether or not Jubei was still around and able to hear his words.

"We'll have to abandon our previous plans." Forestalling any outbursts from his younger siblings by holding a hand up for silence, Renga continued. "I highly doubt that the Dokudes would wait until we've conquered the Nano country before having us go after the Genin teams. The Nano country will have to wait. We go after the Genins first, kill them off as soon as possible and then we come back for our riches." He answered with a tone of finality in his voice.

Soon, once all members of the Ninja gang were gathered together, they all set off in different directions, all waiting and wanting to get this setback over and done with as soon as possible.

The next two days of travel went relatively smoothly for Team Gai. With his Byakugan activated now and again, Neji was able to direct the team's journey farther and farther away from the meddling Missing Nins until they've completely lost them altogether. It was a good day for Team Gai. They had gathered extra provisions while on their journey, having learnt from the Gai the necessities of survival training in the wild. They had made great progress and had even found extra time to rest and relax, or in Lee's case, train. So overall, Team Gai had become rather complacent during their travels and was in no way prepared to face off against what was ahead.

"We've found them."

"Good, send the men over to eradicate them immediately. If they can get rid of the pesky brats, then we won't even have to lift a single finger ourselves."

"You sure these kids will be that easy to kill, Aniki?"

"Who knows, let's just sit back and watch how skilled they truly are before we pull out the big guns."

Upon travelling through a dense forest, Neji suddenly called for his teammates to stop. Looking confused at each other, nevertheless, both Tenten and Lee kept quiet until Neji deems to answer the silent question as to why they had stopped moving.

With his Byakugan peeled for any danger within the vicinity, it was easy for Neji to identify the 40 odd Ninjas hidden all around them in a wide circle. These ninjas held no specific forehead protectors so Neji could only conclude that they were mercenaries for hire or Missing Nins. Quietly, he spoke to his teammates warning them of the indefinite battle coming up. "40 Ninjas surrounding us in a wide circle. They wear no forehead protectors so they're either mercenary, bandits or Missing Nins. They seem to be between high Genin to

Chuunin level in rank from what I can see of the development of their Chakra circulatory system."

"GOSH! Let's see how many of them we can defeat! Let's show them our POWER OF YOUTH!" Jumping at the chance to exercise his body, Lee immediately leapt off to his right, instantly engaging a group of Ninjas in a fast paced hand on hand combat.

Tenten sighed in tiredness before jumping into the trees to follow in her teammates footsteps, but this time, she headed for her left in order to engage a few Ninjas with a mass swarm of projectiles and weapons mastery.

Neji continued to look forward, waiting for the ninjas that surround him on both his front and back to attack simultaneously. The enemy ninjas were ruthless as they threw hundreds of Shuriken at Neji, all aiming for vital areas upon his body. Neji waited until the last moment before performing a Kaiten in order to deflect the barrage of projectiles - rebounding the shuriken back to their original masters. For those ninjas who were unable to dodge the returned fire, they easily fell due to the injuries they had attained, rendering them unable to continue to battle. A few of the enemy ninjas pulled out their own swords (of various shapes and sizes) and began ganging up on Neji once more, aiming to slice him to pieces.

The Hyuuga prodigy (with his Byakugan still activated) easily dodged and out manoeuvred the attacks of his enemies. While dodging incoming swipes of the sword, Neji was still able to attack his foes with decisive Jyuken strikes, aimed at critical areas to render a person unconscious, unable to battle or even dead.

A direct strike to the neck, chest or abdomen was able to render people unconscious. Further strikes to the limbs or chest were able to numb the opponent's body to the point of collapsing on its own. A few close shaves of incoming shuriken and sword parries forced Neji to perform the Kaiten once more. However, Neji never used his trump card – the Hakke Rokujuu Yonsho (Divine 64 strikes) or the Hakke Hyaku Nijuu Hachi Shou (Divine 128 strikes) through out the

barrage. This was both because he didn't feel it necessary as well as the fact that he simply didn't have enough time to prepare for the attack.

A few more Kaitens later and Neji had rendered all 12 opponents unconscious and on the floor due to the backlash in power of his Kaiten or his previous attacks. Even though these were Chuunins, they had underestimated the power of a Hyuuga. And due to the fact that they charged forward into a hand-to-hand combat zone, with the Hyuuga's superior Jyuken move, they were easily incapacitated by Neji.

Hundreds of kunai and shuriken flew through the air in a tornado of action. Ninjas dodged as best they could but most still managed to attain scrapes and cuts among their body. After all, Tenten's a reputation of being a weapons specialist who always hits 100 bullseyes within 100 strikes was well earned.

Releasing another scroll full of weapons at her opponents, Tenten managed to find some time in order to summon her trusty staff. As all the enemy ninjas eventually ran out of projectile weaponry of their own, they charged at Tenten from different angles, each wielding a deadly looking sword.

Jumping up to avoid a frontal thrust of an enemy's sword, Tenten twisted and managed to parry a few other attempts at stabbing her with a graceful swing of her staff. Landing lightly, Tenten ducked beneath another sword before batting her staff forward, rotating her body as she went along and literary threw a few of her opponents of their feet due to the propulsion of her strike. Gaining some room to breathe, Tenten did not waste her time as she used her beloved staff effectively against the multitude onslaught of enemy ninjas and their deadly swords.

/ As the old Chinese saying goes, for every inch longer, the weapon is every bit stronger! / (3) Feeling confident, Tenten continued to literary bat her opponents away, that is, until one was intelligent

enough to attack her from underground. A hand suddenly ripped out of the ground directly beneath Tenten's feet and grabbed onto her leg tightly. Unable to move from her position, Tenten thrust her metallic staff downward like a deadly spear onto the opponent's vulnerable hand. Through released from her capture, Tenten had to forfeit her staff as she jumped high into the air, just barely avoiding several swords slicing upwards in an attempt to end her life.

Upon landing on top of a sturdy tree branch, Tenten glared hatefully at the ninjas beneath her. / *Damn it! That's one of my favourite weapons!!* / Tenten fumed mentally as she watched how the enemy Ninjas were confiscating her beloved weapon. / *That's it! No more miss nice girl!* / Pulling the twin summoning scrolls from her pocket, she readied her attack. Instead of placing the two scroll beside her in a vertically standing position as she stood atop the slanting tree branch, she threw them up into the air before performing a set of seals. "Soushouryu!" (Rising Twin Dragons)

A loud boom echoed through out that side of the forest as thick smoke covered everything within sight. A second later, two long, thin and graceful white dragons emerged from the smoke cloud and flew directly upwards. Finally stopping in mid air, the dragons seem to twist and twirl around themselves, creating a perfect ribbon of movement. Soon after, Tenten jumped off her perch on the tree branch directly upwards and towards the two dragon's heads still spinning in mid air. Stopping in between the two long scrolls that now took over the forms of the heavenly dragons, Tenten twisted and turned gracefully in mid air, summoning forth hundreds of weapons and directed them all at the various ninjas beneath.

With such a huge barrage of weapons flying their way and no one with any real expertise in barrier or blocking jutsus, most of the enemy ninjas were struck down by Tenten's attack. However, a lucky few did manage to escape the initial assault by using their comrade's bodies as shields in order to protect themselves. These lucky few threw away their human shields the instant Tenten landed on the ground, and they rushed forward intending to kill the dangerous

weapons mistress in one combined strike. Unfortunately for them, Tenten was not unprepared. She jumped off into the air again the instant she had landed upon one of the enemy ninja's sword. Raising both her hands up - small, slightly invisible strings could be seen attached to each of her fingers leading to all of the weapons that she had thrown previously. Flapping her arms together like wings, Tenten was able to lift up all of her weapons and launch them again at the remaining enemy ninjas. Suffice to say, after this second assault, no one was left standing to face off against Tenten.

"URAH!!!" Punching a man's face, Lee easily shattering the man's metallic mask and broke his nose in the process. His opponent screamed in agony at having his nose completely crushed by a single punch so powerful it could probably break boulders.

Ducking under a sword's swipe, Lee swiftly kicked behind the man's knees, forcing the man to drop down onto the ground. "Argh!" Jumping up again, twisting and performing a high kick, Lee was able to smash his heavily weighted leg across the man's neck, rendering his opponent unconscious immediately.

Jumping to avoid a small barrage of shuriken coming his way, Lee landed in between two swordsmen. Dodging the attack of one, Lee stooped low and swiped the other man off his feet. Straightening up once more, Lee ducked into the first swordsman's personal space before bringing forth a volley of punches and knocking the man unconscious. Turning his attention back to the other man, who had finally stood back onto his feet, Lee jumped to avoid another sword's swipe. Jumping straight up and using his feet, Lee caught the man's head and neck within his feet's grip, Lee then twisted in mid air and flipped the man over his shoulders, possibly breaking the man's neck as a result.

Landing, flipping onto his hands and doing summersaults, Lee managed to evade all sorts of attacks and projectiles being thrown his way. He was actually very curious as to why the ninja's surrounding him didn't use any Ninjutsu whatsoever, but

nonetheless, he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Tekken! (Iron Fist)" He cried in enthusiasm as a single punched forced another one of his opponents off his feet and into a nearby tree, smashing against the tree and knocking the man out at the same time.

Sidestepping another sword thrust towards him, Lee grabbed onto the opponent's sword hand, held it tightly and started to twirl the man around in a spin not dissimilar to Neji's Kaiten. The swinging man helped Lee knock out a few more opponents due to his momentum before Lee finally released him, flinging him sideways and knocking down a few more enemies.

"Yosh! Konoha Senpuu!" Rushing forward, Lee swiftly jumped and swung his feet around in a spinning, opened-split kick and knocking away two opponents at the same time. Not exactly a very attractive attack considering he was wearing a one-piece, green spandex suit, but nonetheless an effective manoeuvre.

Taking some time to look back at his teammates, Lee realised that he had become the slowest of them all, knocking individual people down while Neji and Tenten managed to render several people unconscious at one go. "Yosh! I will not lose to Neji-kun! If I do, I will run around on my hands for the next three days!" With that self proclaimed promise, Lee silently released the first of the celestial gates within his body. Now, he wasn't exactly planning on using the Initial Lotus, but he did need the speed that the opening of the first celestial gates grant him if he wanted to catch up to his eternal rival, without having to resort to releasing his weights.

That said, with the new found speed, Lee easily managed to strike at his remaining opponents, one after the other, rendering each one either unable to move or unconscious. He does not aim to kill, as is taught by his beloved Gai-sensei. */ If your opponent is honourable and tries his best, then there is no reason to kill. /* The honour code of a warrior - the code that was passed down from Gai to Lee had helped the boy handle his emotions in most cases that he had faced fighting an opponent. It does not deter from the fact that he was a

Shinobi and will eventually be forced to kill in order to protect his precious people, but as a Shinobi he was still human, and for the moment, he would follow what his human heart dictates instead of what his Ninja skills are capable off.

Several more minutes of continual fighting, Lee too had managed to knock down all his opponents. Overall, all 40 mercenary Ninjas were taken down by Team Gai today, not a bad haul at all. After taking away the enemy Shinobi's weapons and tying them up to whatever trees were available, the three tired genins of Team Gai continued on their journey, this time, wanting nothing more than a hut for them to rest and sleep in peace.

"Che. Looks like all of them failed in killing off the three Genins, seems the brats are stronger than we had originally anticipated."

"Hm... It looks like we'll have to do things ourselves in order to make sure they truly die."

Sigh. "Let's just do this. The sooner we get it over and done with, the faster we can go back to Nano Country and conquer it. Once that's done, we'll finally become Daimyo (Feudal Lord)."

"HAI."

"Hai."

Another two days passed in relative peace before team Gai stumbled upon their next adversaries. So say Team Gai was tired of fighting would be an understatement. Since the start of this Kuunoki Chuunin exam, they have done nothing except run, hide and fight. It was a never ending cycle of meeting up and fending off Missing Nins one way or the other while trying to survive in the wild. Suffice to say, the three Genin members of Team Gai were extremely tired. Even Lee's enthusiastic exclamations about the powers of youth had dwindled slightly due to the fact that Gai-sensei was not there to

encourage him, and neither of his teammates really appreciates his cheer.

As such, they simply weren't impressed when the three Jounins suddenly appeared before them standing challengingly.

"Oh hell! Not again!" Tenten cursed out loud uncharacteristically. "What the hell do you three want? And why the hell are you targeting us in the first place?! What the hell did we ever do to you?!" She shouted with all her pent up frustrations, eyes glaring at the three before her.

"Hmp. You think you're so special that we would go out of our way to attack you, fool? If we weren't forced into this confrontation, we wouldn't have bothered toying with your pathetic lives at all. How about you do us a favour huh? We'll leave you alone after you're dead." Ruiga snapped at the Genins, still surprised and angry that their forces had not been able to take care of these pathetic looking genins, even with 40 Shinobis against them.

Neji's eyes narrowed at the man's statement before coming to a logical conclusion. "Let me guess, Jubei, right? He somehow managed to coerce you into fighting us, against your wills." The tense silence that met Neji's statement only validated the truth.

Lee tilted his head to one side, looking slightly confused. "But if you truly do not wish to fight, then why don't you say so. I'm sure Jubei-san is an understanding warrior."

"As if, you idiots!" Jiga roared in anger. "You see these freaking rings around our necks?" Pointing angrily at the aforementioned ring, Jiga continued. "He's forcing us to fight you, possibly kill you. And if we refuse, we fxxking die!"

"Enough talk. Sorry, boys and girls, but your time is up. I have plans for my future and it does not involve wasting time playing with you." The last of the three Jounins, Renga spoke with a frosty cold voice, eyes piercing like diamonds.

And without further ado, all six people jumped off to various areas to start their own fights.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx **(Leen Vs Ruiga – First round)**

"Konoha senpu!" Lee's jump kick was blocked by Ruiga's spinning tonfa. Pushing the enthusiastic, green-clan boy away, Ruiga strapped his Tonfa's away before performing a set of seals. "Suiton Seibun Houfutsu! (Water Element Water Cannon Replica)"

Upon his summoning, drops of water started emerging directly out of the ground beneath the two combatants. The water particles joined together to form larger and larger balls of floating water. Soon, the entire space between them were saturated with hundreds of balls of water, all of which Ruiga could command with a simple thought.

Ignoring the water balls for the moment being, Lee sprinted past them, effectively dodging them as he made a sprint towards his target. Ruiga simply stood still waiting for the boy to reach him.

"Konoha Dai Senpu!" However, with the extra burst of speed and power, Lee did not notice that Ruiga had already called all the water particles towards him. And in that instant, Ruiga's summoned water surrounded and then swallowed Lee, even while his original assault bounced off a water barrier protecting Ruiga's body.

"Heh. Heh. You really can't use anything except Taijutsu? How pathetic! There's no way for you to escape my Water Techniques." Ruiga sneered haughtily at the trapped Lee.

Now, the green clad boy found himself trapped in a water prison, unable to breathe and worse of all, unable to escape. "Heh. Time to end this brat!" Ruiga taunted even while he bit his thumb and performed a few hand seals: "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" Placing his opened palm onto the surface of the water prison, Ruiga summoned forth a swarm of piranhas to share the same space as Lee. The piranhas all had massively sharp teeth, all grinning and ready to rip

into Lee's spandex clad self. / *Oh dear...* / Lee thought to himself as his large round eyes become larger in size.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx (***Tenten Vs Jiga – First round***)

"Take this!" Flinging hundreds of sharp and pointy weapons at her opponent from her summoning scroll, Tenten could not help but watch in horror as her bulky opponent simply swung his mace around, somehow managing to attract and attach all of her metallic weapons onto the mace itself.

"Hehe. Not bad but you made a very big mistake. Metals are my forte as I specialise in magnetic techniques" The other man taunted as he somehow released the attraction power he held over her weapons and repelled them straight towards her.

Desperately dodging her own weapons, Tenten did not manage to come out of this first assault unharmed. She was knocked back by one of her heavier projectiles and slammed into a tree behind her. She could feel that a few of her ribs had been cracked as well due to the impact, which was definitely not something she wanted to happen. And other than that, she also suffered multiple cuts, wounds and abrasions, ranging from shallow cuts to some deeper ones slowly oozing out blood. Gritting her teeth and taking her opponents words to heart, she called forth a wooden staff as her primary weapon this time. She was not going to trust that none of her other metallic weapons weren't going to be used against her again.

Unfortunately for Tenten, her single wooden staff was in no way strong enough to counter Jiga's mace, which managed to shatter the staff on its first impact. Having run out of options, Tenten decided to retreat, at least for the moment being. It hurt her pride to do this, but it's better than staying and dying.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx (***Neji Vs Renga – First round***)

Neji found himself unable to get close to his opponent. And as a Jyuuken Taijutsu expert, he was unable to harm his opponent if he didn't get within a certain range to attack. Suffice to say, Neji found himself constantly dodging the multiple beams of lasers aimed at him from the sky. With the Byakugan activated, he was able to tell where the beams are focussing on, however, there's no way for him to counter this power. He wasn't even sure if his Hakkeshou Kaiten manoeuvre would be able to properly counter the laser, and as such, he was not in the mood to try it out less he failed.

Launching off the branch of a large tree, Neji turned and flung one of his chakra enhanced kunai (something he learnt from Naruto) at the almost invisible ice crystal in the sky. The crystal structure shattered instantly to a million pieces upon impact as the Kunai was enhanced with power. However, before Neji even had a chance to celebrate, Renga had already created a second ice crystal from where the previous one had been destroyed.

/ Shit. This is like a never ending game of cat and mouse. I have a limited number of kunai to throw at him while he can construct an endless number of ice crystals to counter me. I'll admit, next to Kidoumaru and Naruto, this guy is the strongest opponent I've ever fought against. / Neji mentally analysed. He knew he was at a major disadvantage against this opponent simply because he was not a long range fighter. The only long range fighter in their group would be Tenten but even she may have problems with this opponent as she just wasn't fast enough to dodge his attacks. That leaves Lee...

As much as it pained his Hyuuga pride, Neji knew that he had to switch opponents with his team mates. After all, that's why they were placed in a team in the first place, to balance ones strength and weaknesses. There is no 'I' in 'team', and it's wrong of him to always isolate himself like he had done in the past.

/ Swap opponents, it's the only way to go! / With that decision in mind, Neji expanded his view with the Byakugan, instantly finding both his teammates. */ Damn, Lee needs help.* / Neji dodged another

laser beam aimed at his back, twisted in the air, landing and started running towards another direction, towards his teammates.

Upon arriving at the scene of Lee being (literary) eaten alive by hundreds of piranhas, Neji thrust an opened palm forward. "Hakke Kuushou! (Eight Trigrams: Vacuum Palm)" The chakra blast emitted from Neji's palm slammed against the water prison and broke it instantly. The summoned piranhas were scattered through the air, some were hurt by the blast and immediately disappeared into clouds of smoke, and others managed to remain alive and flopped haphazardly upon the wet ground. Lee, having been released from his water prison, sat up and vomited all the water that had accumulated in his throat before gasping for some much needed oxygen.

At the same time, Tenten suddenly jumped out of a near by tree to land before her teammates. Looking at the wet and relatively okay Lee as well as the rather irritated looking Neji, Tenten derived on the fact that none of them were having much luck with their own opponents. "Swap?" She asked succinctly.

"Swap!" Neji grunted out before rushing towards the largest of the three opponents, whom had followed Tenten through the woods and into this clearing. Producing another Hakke Kuushou, Neji managed to blast the man back to wherever he had originally come from, before following the man's path, giving Tenten and Lee the space they needed to start their own battles.

While Lee was still slightly disorientated on the ground, Tenten launched herself towards Ruiga, whom had been standing at the clearing gaping at the three genins in an annoyed fashion. "You! You're my opponent!" She shouted at him before launching a few kunai towards his head.

Rotating his tonfa into a shield, Ruiga managed to deflect all of Tenten's weapons before sneering at her with lust filled eyes. "You? As my opponent? Don't make me laugh... You're weapons are in no

way superior to my water techniques. I can summon water from the ground beneath your very feet! I have an endless supply of weapons while you only have what you've carried upon your body. Useless child, there's no way you or any of your teammates can win against us."

Glaring angrily at Ruiga, Tenten pulled out another of her summoning scrolls, ready and waiting to make the man eat his words. "Lee, you go and take on whoever Neji was fighting before. Leave this guy to me." She growled. Behind her, Lee finally collected himself off the ground, giving her a snappy salute, Lee rushed off into the direction where he thought Neji originally came through.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx (***Tenten Vs Ruiga – Second round***)

"Soushouryu!" (Rising Twin Dragons) This time, instead of just letting the projectiles fly towards her enemy as it is, Tenten secretly attached exploding tags to almost all of her weapons as she threw them. When the projectiles were blocked by either the floating balls of water that Ruiga had called up, or even the large water shield that protects Ruiga himself, they immediately exploded, sending the millions of water particles flying in all direction. Using the flashy explosion as a distraction, Tenten launched two more kunai at Ruiga, this time enhanced with both power and control using her own Chakra.

The chakra seeking kunai were aimed at two specific objects, Ruiga's tonfas, as those two handheld weapons were what Tenten suspect were her opponent's greatest tool. Upon impact between the two weapons, the tonfas were instantly shattered to pieces, and if Ruiga had not abandoned his weapons and jumped away just in time, he might have been caught in the resulting explosion.

"Heh. You think I needed those tools to summon my water? You're a fool!" Performing a familiar set of seals again, Ruiga called out his technique. "Suiton Seibun Houfutsu! (Water Element Water Cannon Replica)" When a large amount of water rose up from the ground

once more, Ruiga bit his thumb, performed another set of seals before placing his bleeding palm upon the surface of water ball. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" A large swarm of piranhas once again emerged inside the water ball. "Go after her!" Ruiga ordered as the strange mass of water and piranha fishes rushed forward towards Tenten's location.

Surprised, Tenten immediately turned tail and run, not looking back at her opponent while quickly trying to think up another counter attack. Ruiga used this time to summon forth a second large mass of water from the underground, and then he performed a second Summoning: "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" This time, a giant shark with human clothes (scarf and jacket) emerged from the smoke, and it too took off after Tenten as well. Ruiga followed his summons and prey from a safe distance behind.

Running at her top speed, Tenten's mind was a whirl of ideas, formed and then discarded. */ Let's see, he summons water from the ground, so to take that advantage away from him, I have to go to a place that is very dry. Other than that, I also have to find a way to defeat him. HOW!!! /* Her mental voice rang through out her head. She was frustrated and annoyed that nothing she tried so far had worked. Not to mention she's down to a few kunai, shuriken and one scroll left on her body. */ Shxt! I'll just have to wing it. /*

Jumping off a tree branch that was soon consumed by the piranhas flying behind her, Tenten's eyes swung around in all directions looking for a possible place for them to fight. And that was when she saw it - a rocky mountain top with no trees or vegetation around its cliff. */ That means that there's very little water near there, the plants are unable to grow. Perfect! /*

Putting more energy into her legs, Tenten increased her running pace slightly and jumped towards the rocky mountain. Two minutes later found her standing tiredly on top of her salvation. Behind her, she could hear Ruiga and his summons catching up. */ Good. Everything's set. Let round two begin. /*

"Hehe! No where to run now, little girl! Time to DIE!" Ruiga shouted gleefully as he landed on the sandy surface of the mountain, not even noticing that the ground below him were very dry.

/ He's within range, NOW! / Biting her thumb to draw out blood, Tenten unrolled a small black scroll that she held in her hand, while consecutively smudging her bleeding thumb across the scroll of words, before re-rolling it up to it's original form, grabbing it and performing a few seals with the scroll still in hand.

"Ninpou Kuchiyose: Kinzoku no ame! (Ninjutsu Technique Summoning: Metallic Rain!)" Throwing the small scroll up high into the air, it suddenly exploded creating a large smoke cloud that covered the area above her. Emerging from the cloud instantly were thousands of weapons, sizes ranging from a few centres to full metre-lengths. The varieties of weapons include kunai, short swords, maces, senbons, shuriken and more. The rain of weapons flew through the air in elegant arches before plummeted forth onto the ground, each one precisely Chakra enhanced to the point of being 'Chakra-seeking' weapons. Because they were 'Chakra-seeking' weapons, they automatically attack anything with a high degree of Chakra upon an increased range of 30-metre radius around Tenten's own location.

The swarm of piranhas were rendered into pin cushions, each and every one of them disappearing into smoke as small metal needles pierced their bodies, even the protection of the water bubble they were inside of didn't protect them from the barrage of chakra seeking weapons. The summoned shark was no better, having been struck with a giant mace and a huge head-cleaving sword. Ruiga too, being the summoner, had most of the weapons aimed towards him due to his large chakra capacity. They flew so fast that he simply didn't have time to react, and when he instinctively tried to call forth his water shield as a defence – it wouldn't come as there was not enough water in the surrounding area. As a result, Ruiga's body was pierced by multiple swords, kunai, shuriken, senbon, and all sorts of other weapons.

By the end of the assault, Tenten was exhausted. But she had defeated her opponent and that was all that mattered. Looking around tiredly, she groaned as she realised that she would have to pick up every single weapon she had ever flung and re-store them in her scrolls again.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx **(Neji Vs Jiga – Second round)**

"From a very young age, I kept on drinking iron. With all the iron that has since accumulated in my body, I can change the magnetic polarity whenever and wherever I want. Incidentally, I can also turn things I touch into magnets." Jiga taunted cruelly. Raising his arms around and indicating the mountain cliff behind him, he couldn't help but smirk at the weak looking genin before him. "This mountain behind me has a lot of iron in it, making it my ultimate battle field. These rocks have all turned into magnets, magnets I use for my attacks!"

Neji charged at the man with his Byakugan eyes flashing and palms opened. However, at the last possible moment, Jiga suddenly slid smoothly to the right, and then up the rocky Cliffside. He stood perpendicular to the vertical cliff edge, looking as calm and natural as possible. Neji frowned as he hadn't seen Jiga activate any chakra around his feet when he seemingly levitated off the ground. It was unnatural - these smooth levitation techniques used by Jiga, and it annoyed Neji a lot.

"Didn't you hear a word I said before, you stupid punk? I can use my Magnetic Ninja arts to manipulate the magnetic fields in this place, enabling me to practically fly." The Jounin continued to taunt. Swinging his mace around, Jiga smashed it into the mountain's stones before him. "Jishaku Ninpou: Mugen Inseki! (Magnetic Ninja Arts: Infinite Meteors)" The iron condensed rocks were loosened from their confinement in the mountain side and it immediately flew towards Neji like Tenten's weapon projectiles.

"Hakkeshou Kaiten!" Performing the heavenly spin, Neji gracefully deflected all the stones thrown towards him.

"Hm. You're a tougher nut to crack, but it isn't impossible." Jiga then threw a handful of what seems like black dust into the air, before launching into a set of seals. "Jishaku Ninpou: Denji Genmu (Magnetic Ninja Arts: Electric Phantasms)" Suddenly, small sparks of electrical charges appeared through out the mass of released black particles surrounding Neji's form. The sparks of light and energy captivated Neji's attention, almost hypnotising in its affect. In fact, it was so effective that Neji no longer paid any attention to his surroundings, or even his opponent.

Looking at the boy in amusement, Jiga spoke in a deep voice. "Ah. A human's brain has faint cavities that allow currents to flow through them, enabling the brain to function. If I change the magnetic polarity, the interference that it creates will stop a person's ability to think... You're trapped in my Electric Genjutsu, boy and there's no way out of it!" The man sneered cruelly before he swung and slammed his metallic mace right into Neji's chest, smashing the Hyuuga through several trees before releasing him. "Ahahaha..." Jiga laughed in amusement.

Shaking his head to reorientate himself, Neji spat out some blood before glaring at Jiga once more. */ He uses a combination of Magnetic Ninja arts and Iron Sand Illusionary techniques./* Neji analysed as he continued to watch Jiga's body, and especially how the man manipulates the magnetic fields from within his internal chakra pathways. */ He switches his magnetic power on and off so that his own body will not become a magnet. I see. If that's the way he does it, then there is still a way for me to win. /*

Rushing forward towards his enemy, Neji concentrated with his Byakugan searching for the man's main weakness.

"Heh. That won't work! Jishaku Ninpou: Denji Genmu (Magnetic Ninja Arts: Electric Phantasms)" Jiga called out once more to activate his Jutsu.

However, this time, Neji was prepared. Performing a mid-run Kaiten blasted all the iron sand away from his body, stopping the man's attack instantly. Dodging the mace that Jiga had threw towards his head, Neji ducked and struck with two pointed fingers into the side of Jiga's huge body.

"Is that supposed to hurt?" Jiga growled as he swung his large hand towards Neji's face. Neji ducked just in time before jumping backwards, avoiding the returning mace, somersaulting and landing gracefully upon the ground once more.

This time, it was Neji who had a smirk upon his face. "Just now, I put an interfering electrical current into your chakra. Now your body will become a powerful magnet." He stated calmly even while Jiga grimaced as his own mace seem to slam right into his chest, crushing his own ribs and organs. But before the man could utter a single word, he felt himself pulled backwards, attracted to the iron filled mountain behind him. The impact of his body smashing into the hard but sharp, rocky surface of the mountain's cliffs left Jiga breathless. But more than that, he found a very sharp rock, shaped like a spear, sticking out his right shoulder, all the way through his lungs and ribcage. Choking on his own blood, Jiga's eyes widened at the implications of this. He swung his attention back to Neji, this time silently pleading for mercy and help.

Neji could only look back in slight sorrow. "I'm sorry, but the technique I used cannot be taken back." With that, Neji gave Jiga a small bow before turning his back and started limping away, waring of hurting his injured ribs anymore. His eyes were determined and mind focussed upon finding his teammates once more. Killing and death were all part of a Shinobi's life, sooner or later Neji would have to learn those lessens anyway.

xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx XXX xxx **(Lee Vs Renga – Second round)**

"Mou. Don't you know by now that Taijutsu is no use against me?" Renga yawned as the ice crystal lens in the sky continued to beam

down with a powerful laser beam. "I can gather the tiny water particles from the water vapour in the air to create ice crystals. I then turn these ice crystals into a lens and by focusing the sunlight - I've created an unlimited supply of lasers. There's just no way for you to win. Give up now." Renga continued to mock Lee with an almost bored expression upon his face.

"I will NEVER give up. With the power of youth, I swear on my Nindou that I WILL beat you. And if I am unable to beat you, I will perform 5000 push ups. And if I am unable to do 5000 push ups, then I will do 10000 jump kicks, followed by running around the village 800 times, and if..." Lee enthusiastically shouted all his ambitions while running at top speed, effectively avoiding the lasers beaming down on him.

"SHUT UP! Don't you ever get tired of listening to your own voice?" Renga growled at the oddity of the boy's behaviour. With that said, he created a few more ice crystal lenses in the sky, all focussing on the individual, moving object known as Lee.

Dodging another condensed laser beam, Lee tried to think of a way to defeat his opponent. *I He may be strong but he's not fast enough. My speed is the only thing keeping me alive. I will have to use that to my advantage. Gomen ne, Gai-sensei. Even though I am not protecting any precious person, I will have to use this technique in order to prove my Nindou. I refuse to lose now. This is a chance of a lifetime and I just can't let myself lose. I must pass this phase of the exam and go to the Kuunoki. Naruto-san and the others are waiting for me. I WILL NOT LOSE HERE! I*

Skidding to a sudden stop, Lee took only a split second before unclasping the metal weights strapped to both his legs. With the weights gone, it was even easier for Lee to dodge the lasers, resulting in Renga getting more and more impatient.

By that time, Renga had reached his limit of patience with the boy. He created a large ice crystal under his feet, levitating him into the air and started following Lee around, mentally directing the multiple

lenses' focus on the rushing form of Lee. But even from this distance, he watched perfectly as Lee had suddenly stopped running and was yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Hachimon Tonkou! Dai-San, Sei Mon... KAI! URA RENGE! (Eight Gates Opening! Number Three, Life Gate... OPEN! Primary Lotus!)" Lee screamed at the top of his voice, as thick veins sprouted upon his forehead and his skin turned an ugly red. The massive surge of Chakra could be felt many kilometres away and even Renga was shocked at the explosion of released chakra.

With the new surge of power, Lee suddenly sprinted off in a blur of dust and sand, running at incredible speeds towards Renga's floating position. Even though Renga was still in the air, Lee was able to jump and his propulsion launched him all the way towards Renga's location in a single jump. In a split second, Lee had reached Renga and slammed his red skinned fist right into the older man's face, punching him with enough power to bring a whole house down.

Instantly flung backwards by the powerful assault Renga fell from his ice crystal foundation towards the ground below. But even before he had the chance to land properly, Lee suddenly appeared behind him and launched a "Konoha Dai Senpū! (Leaf Spinning Wind)" The powerful kick crashed into Renga's face launching him towards another direction. And again, Lee reappeared just in time to smash his interlocked fingered towards Renga's head like a man made mace, forcing the man to fly straight down towards the ground. Catching up to his opponent once more, Lee performed his final move against Renga. "AHHHH!" The green clad, red skinned boy screamed as he simultaneously punched and kicked Renga for a final time. The massive force of the impact shattered most of Renga's bones and ripped apart his organs before slamming him towards the ground, creating a huge crater. Beside the unconscious missing Nin, Lee finally released the Primary Lotus technique, slumping onto the ground in agony and exhaustion. Soon he too fell into unconsciousness.

Upon finding Lee's unconscious form and Renga's dying one, Tenten and Neji silently supported their incapacitated teammate between them, before walking away from the clearing, leaving behind their enemies without a backward glance. They had passed Jubei's test, and that was all they cared about at the moment. Three Genins facing against 3 Jounins and a swarm of Chuunin and other Genin Missing Nins was almost unheard of until today. They had only been on the road for less than a week and already they felt like they've been doing this for years. Simply put, they were simply too exhausted to care.

"You disappointed me. Renga-san, Ruiga-san and Jiga-san." Jubei's displayed his lips in a pout even while he held a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Three Jounins, forty Chuunins and Genins, weren't able to defeat or kill three small Genins from Konoha? How pathetic..." The icy tone of voice slipped from Jubei's slightly smiling mouth once more. "Well, your services are no longer required." With that said, Jubei turned away.

And with a flick of his fingers, he managed to silently severe all the necks of the Missing Nins whom he had captured during their first meeting before resizing his beloved rings back to return to his hands, arms and fingers. These deaths include Renga, Ruiga and Jiga's. As such, in that one short day, 43 Missing Nins were found dead, their heads decapitated seamlessly.

/ I guess they passed. / Jubei though smugly to himself. / I don't think I've got anything else I can 'legally' throw at them that won't infuriate Ruri-sama. Guess they've pass my test then. / Sigh. / How boring... /

End.

(1) Don't ask, I completely made it up.

(2) That's right people, they are the same characters from the Naruto Cannon series – Nano Country arc. As such, for those of you who

follow the animation, you should be familiar with their techniques already.

(3) This really is an old Chinese saying. Well, this is (sort of) a direct translation of it anyway, I hope I got it right.

Finally done!

I know some you may find that last scene rather disturbing since I've always made Jubei seem kinda harmless in the previous chapters. But you all must remember, he is the LEADER of the Gate Guardians, and he also has the nickname of being the 'SMILING KILLER'. There's got to be some truth to it.

Now, next chapter will talk about the time Naruto, Sakura and Shikamaru spent in the Kuunoki, as well as what happens when the genins finally reached the gates of the Air village. Please be patient and remember to read and review!

Chuunin Exam 1st Phase V

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Six: Chuunin Exam - First Phase V

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ' ,
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: Not much happening in this chapter at all. A lot of talking and describing but that's about it. No action this time. However, I do hope you guys like my descriptions of the Kuunoki village. You can even find a link to a picture I drew of the entire village on my profile's page. I hope you enjoy.

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 26

Closing the thick book she had been reading, Sakura coughed at the resulting dust that came floating up into the air due to her action. Glancing over the worn cover of the book she wondered who had been the last person to have touched these ancient looking books besides herself. By the layer of dust that covered all of them upon

the old wooden shelves, she felt that it must have been at least several years since they were last touched.

/ Judging by age, Seiko was probably the last person down here. / Giving a heavy sigh, Sakura couldn't help but compare her progress with that of the child prodigy of the Dokudes clan. / I'm thirteen years old, struggling to handle the concepts of something Seiko probably learnt when she was what? Four? Five? It's so ridiculous how weak Konoha's knowledge of medical theories are compared to the Kuunokis, no wonder Tsunade-sama is such a damn Medical guru. She must have looked like she could heal anything with the knowledge she holds on the concepts written in these scrolls... / Another heavy sigh left Sakura as she mentally went over the parting moment between herself and her teachers back in Konoha. / I miss them... I miss home... /

Sakura's sombre thoughts were cut off abruptly by the door to the chamber opening slightly, a young but regal looking woman entered the room quietly but gracefully. She walked towards Sakura with a gentle but calm expression upon her pale face, violet eyes gleaming in the candle lit room. Folding the violet flowered, Kimono sleeves, the woman gracefully sat across from Sakura (and her pile of books on top of the low table), with a small but gentle smile on her face.

"Good afternoon, Ryoko-sama (1)." Sakura gave a respectful bow before the woman, disregarding the cramp she felt from sitting too long on her knees.

"How are your studies going, Sakura-kun?" The woman's voice was deep, powerful, but at the same time gentle.

"It's... going well. I'm half way through the books you had given me on the concept of DNA Sequencing, or Deoxyribonucleic acid (2)." Sakura stated calmly even while eyeing warily the huge pile of books and scrolls that had been handed to her the moment she had met her designated sensei.

"You are having problems understanding the theories." This was a statement, not a question. "What exactly are you having problems with?"

Sakura blushed. From a very young age, Sakura had always been prided for her book smarts, and very rarely had she ever had to ask for help regarding a concept or theory. She usually just absorbs everything she reads and memorises it. Now she finds herself having to ask for explanations that should have been obvious to her due to the fact that she had undergone some Medical training, and under Tsunade - the greatest Medical Ninja known through out the world as well. It was embarrassing and humiliating at the same time. Why couldn't she understand it - this question was eating her alive.

However, like all great students, the goal of learning surpasses her pride and preconceived self-consciousness. And as such, Sakura pushed away her pride in order to answer the seemingly innocent question.

"I just don't understand how DNA can be manipulated after it has already been developed." Sakura finally answered. "I mean, I'll understand it if we're dealing with the DNA of an unborn baby, let's say... The DNA sequencing of an unborn baby has not been completely confirmed, and therefore can easily be manipulated by the addition of extra genes or chromosomes. But a fully developed man or women would have had all their (normally) 23 pairs of chromosomes and mitochondrial DNA (3) developed all the way to adulthood. How can we change that during such a late stage of life?" Sakura explained with a doubtful expression on her face.

A long pause followed Sakura's questioning, before the Dokudes leader deemed ready to answer. "Anything that is born can die. Anything that is formed can be broken or destroyed. Even DNA... can mutate. And it is the art of cell mutation that you will learn. With forced cell mutation, you are literally breaking the very fabric of the human DNA sequence, regardless of age or conformity." Watching Sakura's still doubtful expression, Ryoko continued to explain.

"When you perform a healing jutsu, what exactly are you doing to the DNA of your patient?" She asked.

Sakura frowned in concentration as she thought about her answer. "I'm using my chakra to encourage the patient's cells to regenerate and heal over the injuries or wounds."

"And is that so different to cellular mutation?" Ryoko asked with a lifted eyebrow. "You're just using Chakra to force good, living cells into multiplying and taking away the rotting or dead cells in the body. Cellular mutation goes one step further." Sakura's blank face met Ryoko's explanation.

"A cell's basic machinery separates the DNA double helix, and uses each DNA strand as a template for creating a copy of the previous strand. Errors that occur during the creation process are called mutations. Mutations are the results of the cells' attempts to repair chemical imperfections that occurred during the process. For example, when a base is accidentally skipped, inserted, or incorrectly copied, or the chain is trimmed, or added to – these are all categorized as mutations. On rare occasions, wrong pairing can happen as well. Mutations can also occur after chemical damage (through mutagens), light (UV damage), or through other more complicated gene swapping events. (4)"

"You also have to remember that cells die and regenerate constantly. As such, mutations can occur regardless of a person's age. For example, if an adult comes into contact with radiation, his or her DNA is easily mutated by the properties exhibited by the radiant, regardless of their age or physical development. Mind you, children *are* more susceptible to genetic changes, but mutations occur all the time and through out their entire lives. It simply doesn't matter at what stage of development the mutation occurs."

"Taking that into account, chakra can be used to simulate any of the mentioned mutations I have listed previously. But you have to remember; even a small change in the DNA strand will have catastrophic results. As such, you must have extreme precision,

perfect chakra control and an expert knowledge over the human genome to even attempt anything on someone's live DNA sequence. A very difficult combination to achieve." Ryoko concluded as she slowly got up into a standing position. Turning away from her student, the regal woman made her way towards the door once more.

Sliding it open, Ryoko paused in mid stride towards the outside world. "Take a break, Sakura. You've been cooped down here in the Dokudes Library too long. You should take some time out to meet your friends. By the way, there are only a few more days left before the Chuunin exam participants make it here. So relax a little." The older woman said before completely stepping out of the room and leaving a contemplative Sakura behind.

Folding the wooden door inward and sliding it towards the side, Sakura tentatively stepped through the threshold to meet the sunlight she had not known she'd miss. Pausing to close the old, Chinese style sliding door (5) behind her, Sakura took a deep breath of fresh air before scanning her surrounding for anyone she knew. Looking from one side to the next, Sakura concluded that she was alone in the Dokudes residential district.

This wasn't unusual, as most of the Dokudes members she had met were similar to the Hyuugas but far more isolated. They each had their own lads in order to work in, or they were responsible for the general running of the village itself. For example, she had met a few Dokudes members who were in charge of maintaining the seals that handle the water purification plant, separating the raw sewerage and filtering them again and again until the water was reusable once more. It was a fascinating tour that Sakura and Shikamaru had been introduced to on their first day arrival to the Kuunoki village.

FLASHBACK

Blinking in order to get use to the bright sunlight, Sakura shivered slightly at the cooler air that suddenly surrounded her. Having spent

most of her life living in the Fire nation, she was not use to the cool (almost cold) air that circulates the Kuunoki. Not only that, but as a medic nin, she could instantaneously tell the difference in air pressure as well as the thinness of the air itself, in which she breathed in with every breath.

Watching her having trouble breathing, Naruto quickly calmed her as best he could. "It takes a while to get use to the thin air. But you must calm down Sakura. Take a deep breath; hold it for 5 seconds, and then release. Do this again and again until your heart calms down. The key to getting use to this place fast is to breathe as deeply as you can. Whatever you do, don't panic and start panting; that will make you breathless and with a lack of oxygen you may pass out."

Following her old team mate's instruction, Sakura soon got use to the thinness of the air. Nodding back in affirmation of her calmed state, the foursome (Sakura, Shikamaru, Naruto and Jubei) started moving forward towards their destination. And it was during this time that Sakura and Shikamaru caught the first glimpse of the ancient Village hidden in the air.

The Kuunoki village didn't really match their expectations to say the least. It was sparse and lonely looking, the buildings were old by very much still in top shape, the roads were worn and perfectly flat. It was disconcerting to say the least when comparing Kuunoki's silent, almost frozen disposition against Konoha's lively atmosphere. Amused by the expressions on the faces of the two newly promoted Chuunins, Naruto decided to give them a brief description of what the Kuunoki village is like, while Jubei led them silently towards the Council's tower.

Clearing his throat, Naruto began to describe the Kuunoki village as he remembered it. "For a village built on top of one of the tallest mountains in the world, the hidden Air Village is much smaller village than Konoha. Roughly a quarter in size to Konoha, much of the land here is simply open plain and bricked pathways, sprinkled with a few really old trees here and there. As you can see, the buildings are all

straight cut, made mainly from wooden pillars and floorboards, red mud bricks and grey curved tiled roofs (6). All the accommodation houses are built into units stretching many metres in long straight lines, instead of the roundish architecture style that Konoha is famous for. Each unit of houses either belongs to long standing clan, like the Dokudes, or are conjoined together to create one large community housing area, shared between several families."

" Many things within the Kuunoki village are community based as well." Naruto explained. "For example, there is no such thing as a private bath within any of the houses. As such, everyone attends the public bath houses. It is the same with eating arrangements; there is a massive town hall building in which everyone arrives together during meal times. Chores and various community based tasks are also shared - like the multitude of agricultural fields that have to be harvested, the hunting of meat, the maintenance of power from the wind mills and water mills, the maintenance of the water purification system, the maintenance of the gas house as well as other necessary utilities; even chores that deal with the general cleanliness of the village as a whole is a shared responsibility between all the villages. Pretty much the only people who don't have to do all these menial things are the members of the Uzumaki family. Since they are the traditional rules of the Kuunoki, they are exempt from these day-to-day routines."

" You will find very little individualism here, other than the fighting styles and specialities of each individual person you will come to met. The Kuunoki is a very tight-nit **community** ." Naruto concluded before mumbling under his breath. "That's one of the reasons why they are so heavily controlled by the council and detest outside influences."

Crossing over a zigzagged wooden bridge over crystal clear running water, the three Chuunins and one Gate Guardian cross over the seemingly small stream onto an island within a large lake located right in the heart of the Kuunoki village. Stopping in mid-step, Jubei turned around to face the Chuunins before him. "Well, this is as far

as I take you guys. Naruto-sama, you will have to show them to the 7 Councillors first, and then after that, I'd suggest giving them a tour of the place, before bringing them to their authorised sensei's. I'm gonna have to leave you guys now as I've still got the Chuunin exams to proctor. So yeah, see ya!" With those words, Jubei summoned forth one of his teleportation rings and disappeared, leaving the three teenagers before him alone in a seemingly desolate village.

Giving a heavy sigh, Naruto trudged on. "Come on."

" Um... Naruto? Who is my sensei? From Jubei's tone of voice, it seems as if you already know. And why is it I have to go to this person; isn't my sensei going to at least introduce themselves while we meet the council?" Sakura asked in curiosity as she followed in her team-mate's footsteps.

" You have to understand something, Sakura. We may be guests, but more than that, we are outsiders. **We** have to work to the schedules of the locals, not the other way around. If my guess is right, you've probably been apprenticed to, Seiko's mother who is the current head of the Dokudes Clan. She's also the most powerful medical ninja in the Kuunoki at the moment. And no, we'll have to go find her; she won't be making any effort in finding us. That's because we haven't proven ourselves worthy yet of the apprenticeship. Well, that is, you haven't, Sakura." Naruto answered rather timidly, hoping that Sakura won't be disappointed by his explanations.

Sakura, having taken some time to think over Naruto's words, finally nodded in confirmation. "I understand. I'll just have to work really hard to impress her, yeah?"

Smiling, Naruto was glad that Sakura hadn't taken his words the wrong way. This time it was Shikamaru who sighed in tiredness that drew the other two's attention. "Man, this is so troublesome. Meeting the council first thing, man they really want to eat us alive don't they?"

Naruto's smile immediately disappeared the moment Shikamaru mentioned the Councillors. "Guys, I'll give you some hints as to how to act in front of the Councillors. Rule number 1, you must NOT speak unless spoken to. Rule number 2, you must show ABSOLUTE respect to each and every member of the council. Rule number 3, you must NOT contradict the council's ruling, or else you will find yourself in a very painful situation. This also means that you have to follow everything the Councillors say. Trust me, it's the easiest way to deal with them. Just go in, bow, stay quiet and show your respect, listen to every word they say and follow their rules. If you do all that, then you'll be fine. Do not EVER go against the councillors; because if you do, not even I or Aunt Ruri can protect you from punishment. And usually, punishment in the Kuunoki is death. Everyone got that?" He asked sternly.

Sakura gulped in apprehension but nodded succinctly. Shikamaru only sighed heavily before nodding in confirmation as well.

It didn't take long for the three Konoha Chuunins to reach the large red bricked building before them. Naruto took it upon himself to knock on the golden handrails connected to the large, intimidating doors. A second later, the doors moved on their own, opening without needing any assistance at all. The atmosphere instantly became tense with fear and apprehension; the air heavy with pressure, pressing on the shoulders of the Chuunins while they took their time walking silently into the building. Once they crossed the threshold, the doors behind them slammed shut without any warning. If the three hadn't been so tense in the first place, they would have found it funny that their entire situation mirrored that of a haunted house to the 'T'.

Walking as nonchalantly as possible, Naruto led his two comrades to the council chamber. Passing the multitude of curtains and walls of fabric separating the outer doors with the inner chamber, the three Konoha Nins soon found themselves in the heart of the building.

Directly in front of them stood a golden throne of some sort, where Ruri sat straight as a pillar. Her eyes were sharp, mouth thinned to a

straight line and face impassive. Beside her, Kaga also stood in a straight posture – not intimidating but not really welcoming either. However, it wasn't Kaga or Ruri that caught the attentions of Shikamaru and Sakura; it was the seven cloaked forms sitting in a straight line on high cushions on left side of the room that made them feel uneasy. All seven forms were cloaked under a large layer of white cloth, covering everything from their toes to their fingers to their faces and even their hair. The seven were of different sizes, some were small, others were tall, but each looked unnatural in their own way as if nature was never meant to look... well... this 'white'.

Forcing their attentions away from the seven intimidating figures, the three faced forward and concurrently bowed deeply towards Ruri as a show of reverent respect, dropping straight down to their knees in the effort.

" Name." Ruri's voice was stone cold and it sliced through the thick tension in the air.

" Uzumaki Naruto." Naruto answered succinctly.

" Nara Shikamaru." Shikamaru's voice never wavered even under the intense scrutiny.

" Haruno Sakura." Sakura's voice however, by comparison was softer and slightly nervous but she answered none the less.

" Proof of invitation." Ruri's voice rang through out the silent chamber once more, confusing Sakura and Shikamaru instantly. Luckily for them however, Naruto quickly retrieved from his pocket the original invite scroll given to them by Jubei – the same one that Tsunade had read previously. He placed the delicate looking scroll onto the floor before the three teenagers and bowed once more.

Kaga stepped forward and retrieved the scroll in silence. Unrolling the scroll slightly, he read through the inscriptions written on it, before rolling it back up. Turning towards the council 7, Kaga nodded once as confirmation. With that done, he turned his back onto the

teenage ninjas and trudged back to his original spot beside the Lady Oracle.

" Acknowledged." Ruri finally answered, confirming their introduction into Kuunoki society. It was then that the first of the councillors spoke. Her voice was old and ephemeral, flowing and yet unnatural. It was an eerie voice that brought chills down all three Chuunin's spines.

" Welcome to the Kuunokigakure no Sato. To stay, you must abide by these rules. Remember, breaking of any rules will result in death of torture. Number 1, NO killing without authorisation of the 7; number 2, No stealing... period; number 3, never disrespect any member of the Kuunoki, number 4, ..."

The next 2 hours were spent listening to the droning of that first member of the seven high councillors. It was shocking how there were so many rules and regulation to live under if you wish to stay in the Kuunoki. Both Sakura and Shikamaru were so bored that they had to fight hard not to fall asleep on their cramped knees as that would be disrespectful of the councillors. Naruto too, had his mind drifted off to some other issue completely different to their current situation. Suffice to say, all three were grateful when the councillor finally concluded her speech by ending with: "And the final rule, number 1477, never practice chakra control on the mountain sides of Mount Tenju. That is all."

It was only a minute later that found all three Chuunins yawning and stretching their legs outside the council tower. "Man. That was boring and soooo troublesome." Shikamaru whined.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Naruto refocussed on what they were to do now. "I should give you guys a tour of the place. You won't be expected to join your senseis until night fall anyway. I bet you're all pretty hungry too so we can go to the food hall to grab something to eat while we're at it."

With that conclusion in mind, Naruto led the two new arrivals towards the food court. Once they have actually reached the food court, Sakura was surprised by the small number of people actually in the building having lunch. Sure, Naruto had warned her that the Kuunoki only had a total population of around 5 to 6 hundred people, but it was still shocking for her to see such a sparse and yet empty village. "Naruto. Where is everyone?" She nodded to the dozen or so people sitting around the food court having a variety of meals for their lunch.

" Most people here only eat twice a day – breakfast and dinner. So it isn't unusual to see so few people during lunch time. Come on." Naruto led the way towards the food counter and collected some food for himself and his fellow Konoha Chuunins. There were mainly vegetarian food that both Shikamaru and Sakura found to be very different in taste to the foods of Konoha but it still tasted rather good none the less. At the same time, Naruto did his best to introduce the new arrivals to a few of the people that were present. There were some Dokudes members, two from Tori's family, and the rest were an assortment of various small clans that Sakura and Shikamaru had never heard of, let alone knew about.

Sitting down on an empty table somewhere, Naruto lowered his voice as he continued his explanations to his two comrades. "We're given the silent treatment at the moment because they don't know how to deal with us yet. Give them a bit of time and they would generally become friendlier. Though don't expect to make any real friends here. They may be tolerant, but they will never see us as anything but apprentices to their own people." Naruto warned.

After lunch, Naruto showed them the water mills and wind mill farms on the Eastern end of the village, the various housing complexes to the south, to the gas stations and water purification plant on the west, to the massive stadium and tall towers to the North. He also indicated the stairs that led to the Uzumaki palace at the top of the Kuunoki village, but did not take them here.

By the time they had finished their tour it was dinner time and once again, Naruto led them back to the food hall for some food. Just as

Naruto had described, Sakura and Shikamaru found themselves to be more welcomed than during lunch time. Rumours of their arrival had obviously passed through most of the Kuunoki population but even then, the three still found themselves sitting together on an empty table of their own, either for comfort or due to the high intensity stares aimed their way.

Suddenly, Naruto spotted someone on the other end of the massive building. Tugging on Sakura's sleeve, he pulled her along as he walked his way (passing many people) towards the person he had caught a glimpse of. Stopping before an elegant looking woman with long, dark violet hair tied into a top bun, brilliant violet eyes and perfectly smooth, pale skin, wearing a deep, violet flowered kimono; Naruto bowed in respect followed by Sakura. "Dokudes Ryoko-sama. This is Haruno Sakura, my comrade from Konoha." He answered and introduced.

The Dokudes clan head bowed demurely in front of Naruto before giving Sakura an analysing glance. "She has potential." She pointed out without much explanation. And that was the end of the conversation. Naruto bowed once more before pulling Sakura back to their original seats where Shikamaru was still hibernating.

"What the hell was that about?" Sakura whispered urgently to Naruto.

Naruto shrugged. "She's your sensei for the next couple of months, I think."

"WHAT?!" Sakura's surprised shout could be heard through out the entire Kuunoki village. And the rest was history.

END FLASHBACK

Sakura sighed. After that humiliating first impression, Sakura managed to scrape up some self-esteem and followed her new sensei back to the Dokudes clan house (which was more like a mansion to her). Once there, she was shown her room, the training

room, the labs and most importantly, the Dokudes Library. The next days began her one and half week of study training within said Library, in which her sensei had given her a mountain of books to read, understand and memorise. Not an easy feat to say the least, but she did complete most of the readings.

Now, as she walked among the deserted streets and pathways around the Dokudes compound, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to Naruto and Shikamaru while she had been holed up in the dusty Library. Almost as if summoned by her thoughts, Shikamaru suddenly slithered out of a near-by shadow beneath the shade of a giant tree right in front of the Dokudes clan house.

"Yo." Shikamaru waved haphazardly in welcome. "Haven't seen you around for a while, didn't know whether you were still alive or not?" He muttered even while he yawned and scratched the back of his neck.

Sakura gave a resigned shake of her head before replying back. "Same to you. How have you been lately? And where's Naruto?" She looked around them, hoping to see her old team mate, but no luck.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Spent the last week and a half getting comfortable with the Shadow world, learning what I can and can't do while inside that plane of existence." Seeing Sakura's confused look, Shikamaru explained in more detail. "The Shadow world is the world in which Kaga-sensei draws his powers; think of it as a special summoning contract slash bloodline limit. People born into the Shadow-master clan have that special summoning embedding into their very blood. As such, for someone like me – an outsider – to try and harness the same technique, it'll definitely be a lot harder if not impossible to do so. As a result, I need to go the Shadow world and find out to what extent I am able to manipulate it." Looking away, Shikamaru glanced straight up at the clouds the surrounded them. "So far, I'm able to travel through shadows, summon shadows to form shields and weaponry, trap people in shadows. But I'm still having a lot of trouble creating shadow objects on my own; I need an existing shadow to manipulate before I can do anything."

Again, Sakura frowned in confusion and Shikamaru sighed before continuing. "Look, Kaga-sensei has the ability to summon shadows where there aren't any. Black substances just...kinda... appear out of no where for him to manipulate. I can't do that. I need the **use** the shadows beneath my own body, the shadows of this tree or something that is already **there** , in order to perform my jutsus. This means that it limits the flexibility of my shadow usage and it also limits the number of shadow jutsus I can use. Unfortunately, there's no way around that, so I'll just have to learn to live with that handicap." Pausing for a moment, Shikamaru looked back at Sakura. "What about you?" He asked in curiosity.

Sakura shuddered as she remembered her time in the dusty and old Dokudes Library. "I haven't done any real training at all, just a lot of reading and studying. Ryoko-sensei had me read through some of the more advanced books on DNA and human genome..."

"Wha-what?" Shikamaru interrupted, having no knowledge what-so-ever on what Sakura was talking about.

Sakura shook her head before trying to explain it again in layman's terms. "Basically, I'm learning how to change another human's body from the cellular level up. I learning how to break the bonds that hold a person's physical body together and playing with it like a child with a toy."

The succinct explanation left Shikamaru's throat dry as he thought about the implications of Sakura's words. "That's... that's quiet... eh... dangerous." He finished lamely.

Sakura could only nod in return. "It is. It's very dangerous to play with a person's DNA like that, but that's what I have to learn if I ever want to be as good a medic as Tsunade-sama or Ryoko-sensei. Did you know that once you master this, you could literary grow a new arm for someone who had lost theirs in whatever accident they went through. There's so much research put into human biology and development here that it's amazing the rest of the world is so far behind the Kuunoki's theories and concept of human genealogy.

Almost everything is possible once someone is able to master stem-cell development. But here's where we hit a roadblock. Everything is theories and concepts, no one has ever had the courage to go out there and try it. Even Tsunade-sama and Ryoko-sensei (though they've memorised and even wrote most of these books) have only experimented with these concepts on a very small scale, simply because they can't predict the outcome and also because there's only two of them. I'm going to become one of only a handful of specialists who can and will work on these theories."

Shikamaru could only smile warmly at Sakura's enthusiasm when it comes to her passion on medical arts. Waiting patiently for Sakura's random rambling to finish, Shikamaru finally decided to answer the last of her original questions. "I haven't heard from Naruto at all since we first parted. However, from what I've heard from Kaga-sensei, is that he's concentrating on mastering the rest of the Tenkun no Buki."

Sakura winced as she remembered the terrifying powers of those dreadful weapons, and she couldn't help but worry over the health of her team mate. "I hope he's okay."

"Don't worry about it." Shikamaru interrupted. "He's got the Lady Oracle on his side, and she's about as good a Medical ninja as Tsunade and Ryoko-sama from what I've heard."

Sakura nodded silently. Indeed, being the Lady Oracle, she must have had knowledge over millions of jutsu, medical arts included. Naruto couldn't have been in safer hands. But that doesn't mean that Sakura could stop worrying. "I just don't understand why he has to use those god-awful weapons in the first place."

Shikamaru shrugged again for what seemed to be the hundredth time. "It's his birthright. I once asked Kaga-sensei about the origin of the Tenkun no Buki. And although he didn't know much about it, and refused to tell me the secrets that he does know, he did mention that every Uzuamki member will eventually need to summon at least one, if not all of the weapons at one point in their lifetime. The Tenkun no Bukis (Weapons of Heavenly Warriors) are 10 incredibly powerful

weapons from the ancient times. Many ninjas have fought and killed in order to try and find them but they never succeeded. This isn't because the Tenkun no Bukis were kept safe here in the Kuunoki, but because no one can access them other than the members of the Uzumaki family."

"In actuality, the Tenkun no Bukis are scattered all over the world, hidden in places so heavily sealed and protected that only people with the summoning contracts (that is, the Uzumaki family members) are able to summon them and un-summon them when they are needed. That's why no one outside of the Uzumaki family can use them." Shikamaru finished.

Sakura nodded in understanding. "But what if the Uzumaki family don't know where they are either, how come they can summon them in the first place? I mean, I know that Naruto doesn't know where they are placed, so how can he summon them?"

"Summoning contracts don't work like that at all." Shikamaru answered succinctly. "You've never had a summoning contract before so you don't know. But regardless of where the summoned item or subject is, it is simply pulled into where its user wants it to be, and that's that. Location, distance and velocity is thrown out the window, all you have on your hands is an instantaneous transportation technique that activates via the summoner's blood. That's how it works."

Not being able to argue against Shikamaru's point, Sakura gave up trying to interrogate the lazy ninja for more information. Instead, the two found themselves spending the rest of the afternoon and night together just chatting about inconsequential things while looking up at the blue sky turned starry night.

"We're FINALLY here!" Kiba cheered as he looked upon the entrance to the Raishin mountain range, which would lead them all the way up to the Hidden Air Village.

"According to the map, we just have to follow the mountain range path and make it to the top, and then we will have reached the gates of the Kuunokigakure no Sato." Hinata murmured as she looked over the opened 3D map once more for confirmation.

"Hey! Why don't we just run up the cliffs of the mountain with chakra? Then we would save even more time and maybe become the first group to reach there?" Kiba jumped up and down in excitement, wanting to be one of the first few teams to reach the Kuunoki, like how they were one of the few teams to finish the second part of the Chuunin Exams held in Konoha.

"I don't know. There was a warning that appeared on the map when we reached the entrance; it stated that we should not do any chakra control exercises on the surface of the Raishin mountain range." Hinata stated as she looked worriedly at her teammate.

"It's not like they can stop us or anything. Come on, I just don't see why they would forbid something as simple as walking up the mountain slopes. And it's not like we've never done it before, right? Akamaru?" Kiba asked his four legged companion, remembering the time they had to climb their way up a steep mountain slope in order to rescue his precious dog.

Akamaru barked enthusiastically in agreement.

"And if by breaking the rules, we get disqualified? Unlike you, I will not risk our chances of being qualified for this Chuunin exam just for the sake of cutting some time." Sasuke snapped back irritably. Having been one of the few people in this group that had tasted the consequences of breaking rules, Sasuke had become wary of anything that would get him into more trouble than he already is.

"Ah! Shut your face, Uchi-freak. Whose gonna listen to a traitor like you anyway, you coward?!" Kiba snapped back, frustrated and tired of the Uchiha's superiority complex that had returned a few days after the Tokage incident.

"Kiba-Kun!!!" Hinata scolded her canine-loving team mate.

"What did you say, dog-breath?!" Sasuke growled lowly, his eyes brilliant with suppressed fury.

"You heard me! Or are you deaf?!" Kiba retorted without thinking.

"Guys! STOP IT!" Hinata yelled commandingly. And when Hinata gets as irritated as she was right at this moment in time, both Kiba and Sasuke knew that they better behave or else the consequences were not going to be pretty.

"Why am I not surprised to find the two of you at each other's necks so early in the morning?" Ino sneered coldly at the last Uchiha, her eyes literary burning with hate and malice. She and her teammates (Chouji and Shino) walked slowly towards the other group from the dark forest in the Southern direction. Behind them appeared three more Shinobis, none of whom the members of team Kurenai recognised.

"Shino-kun! Ino-san! Chouji-san! You all made it safe and sound, I'm glad." Hinata immediately reverted back to her charming and shy persona, feeling a bit flustered at being caught shouting in such an unladylike manner.

"Eh. Who are those people behind you?" Kiba, ignoring the presences of Ino, Shino and Chouji, immediately asked about the three new comers.

"Ohayo! My name is Naja Daiku!" The cheerful red head waved one hand wildly in greeting. He then pointed to the boy behind him (the one he was currently carrying). "This unconscious one is my best friend, Yuse Samure." Directing a thump towards the cold, almost glowering short figure beside him, Daiku continued the introductions. "And this little lady right here is Gojou Hikon. We're ninjas of the Hidden Snow Village, travelling all the way here to participate in the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams. It's a pleasure to meet you."

While the members of team Kurenai took some time to scrutinies the newcomers, Chouji took it upon himself to introduce the Snow Nins to their allies. "Daiku-san, these are some of the other exam participants from Konoha. The one in black is Uchiha Sasuke, the bowy with the dog is Inzuka Kiba and his faithful dog – Akamaru. The young lady is Hyuuga Hinata." Hinata blushed and bowed formally in response, while Sasuke just snorted in welcome and Kiba bared his teeth under the sunlight.

"Pleasure to meet you." Hinata replied shyly.

Sasuke snorted again and Ino glared back heatedly.

"Why were you all standing around not doing anything?" Trust Shino to get to the root of the problem.

As if snapped back into remembrance, Kiba started jumping on his feet once more. "Yeah, that's right! We were arguing over if we really needed to spend hours following the official pathway towards the Kuunoki or if we should take a shortcut and climb straight up the mountain cliffs with our chakra. I don't see why we shouldn't using Chakra to speed up the process. After all, we're ninja, not civilians! And it's a good idea to boost up our chakra capacity and stuff." Kiba heartily argued his point. Behind him, Hinata could only shake her head in embarrassment while Sasuke refused to look at his foolish team mate any more.

On the other hand, Shino frowned. "I do not believe that's a very good idea." He stated flatly.

Brows knitting together at being shot down so effectively, Kiba challenged Shino to explain why it was a bad idea. After all, both he and Akamaru thought it was a great idea.

"Because even my kikai bugs are wary of the mountain surface. I believe the mountains itself exhibit some properties similar to my Kikai bugs. If you would, Hinata and Sasuke, take a look at the

mountain with your Doujutsus and tell me what you see." Shino asked in a calm manner.

Doing as they were told, Hinata activated the Byakugan while Sasuke activated the Sharingan, both taking their time looking over the huge mountain range before them. What they saw was something awe inspiring.

"My god!" Hinata whispered, even Sasuke's jaws dropped in amazement.

"What!? What!? What did you see?" Kiba couldn't contain his curiosity.

"Chakra! ... Tonnes of it! ... Almost an unlimited supply of Chakra... hidden within the earth of this mountain!" Hinata could not help but stutter as she finally realised what it was they were actually standing on top of.

"This entire mountain range, the whole Raishin mountain range is nothing more than a giant Chakra absorbing... entity. It's amazing!" Sasuke's eyes turned painful as he tried to trace all the intricate Chakra lines all over the mountain range. There were millions of lines, billions perhaps... and it was only the first layer he was actually seeing. The entire concept was mind boggling and he wouldn't have believed something like this could exist until he had actually seen it with his very eyes.

"What the hell does that mean?" Frustrated at the distraught explanations, Kiba would not settle for anything less than complete understanding.

"(7)The Raishin mountain range is a natural phenomenon that acts like a collection reservoir for natural chakra. Basically it slowly absorbs chakra from its surrounding - the trees, the birds, all life that lives on top of it or around it. As time moved on, it continued to suck in chakra. After thousands, no hundreds of thousands of years, this is what it looks like now. Think of it as a living mountain, it grows as it

slowly but surely absorbs chakra into itself. That's why no one is allowed to perform any chakra enhancing or chakra manipulation exercises upon the mountain, unless you want your body's chakra to be sucked up by the mountain itself." A new voice softly but calmly explained the phenomenon before them.

Turning back to look at the Snow Shinobis, they were surprised to see Samure awake, though he still looked terribly exhausted. Undaunted by the gazes set upon him, Samure continued his explanation. "I've heard that the Raishin mountain range is the only one of its kind in the entire world. No wonder the Kuunoki village was build on top of Mount Tenju, the heart of the Raishin mountain range. With a natural chakra absorbing barrier like this, it would be suicide for the other Ninja villages to attack the Kuunoki." Samure concluded, leaving the other Genins stunned at his explanations.

A few long minutes of question and answers later, both teams of Konoha and the team from Snow decided to take the cautious path and follow the worn trail on the map, indicating how they should proceed with travelling on the Raishin mountain range in order to reach the tip of Mount Tenju.

"So, I bet I can race up this mountain path faster than any of you can!" Having nothing better to do, Kiba challenged Ino to a race, wanting to distract her murderous thoughts towards the last Uchiha. If he hadn't needed Sasuke due to the fact that they were teammates, Kiba would have probably thrown the arrogant boy straight into the clutches of Ino.

"You wanna bet, dog-breath!" Already in a foul mood, Ino did not appreciate being challenged. Suffice to the say, the race was on, and the rest of the team members had to start running also just to keep up with their wayward team members.

Five long and gruelling hours later, all the genins decided to stop to rest for a while before going on their way again. Each were exhausted, having kept up running the entire way, and most were

shooting Ino and Kiba glaring looks, as if blaming the two for their exhaustion.

However, their desire to reach the mountain top before night fall spurred the Genins to rest for only a half hour before they were on their way once more. Another six hours passed before they finally reached the top where they found a clearing of some sort. There, they also saw most of the other Chuunin Exam participating teams sitting around idly.

"Eh! So many teams made it before us?!" Kiba cried in surprise. Due to the fact that he hadn't seen any other teams while they were climbing up, he had assumed that they were the first to have reached the Kuunoki. This scene however, did nothing to boost his ego and confidence. In fact, he was down right downtrodden when he found out they were one of the last teams who made it.

"About time, I thought you guys might have made a wrong turn or something." Tenten huffed gruffly, even while giving off a bright smile towards the newcomers to the clearing. "Even Neji was starting to get worried that you guys had gotten lost." She taunted good naturedly.

"Heh. With me and Akamaru in the lead, as if we'd ever get lost!" Kiba taunted back, not wanting to look like a weakly in front of the elder girl.

"Right..." Tenten was all ready to continue the barrage of insults when she was cut off by Neji.

"Enough, the both of you! We're here for the Chuunin exams or have you already forgotten." He commanded as he walked slowly towards Hinata. Giving her a slight nod of approval, Neji smiled gently. "I'm relieved that you finally made it here, Hinata-sama."

Hinata blushed and replied back shyly. "I'm okay, thank you for your concern, Neji-niisan. But I should be the one to call *you* Neji-sama, as you are now ranked higher than me (8)." Surprisingly, her eyes

did not show any shame or discontent with that fact. On the contrary, she was very happy that her cousin had been appointed heir apparent for the Hyuuga clan. With him leading the clan, she knew that he would do a great job.

"Yosh, and may I enquire as to the new additions to our group of comrades!" Lee's enthusiastic yelling pretty much drew all the attentions of the competing genins (from all over the world) towards the three Snow team members.

This time, Chouji stepped forward again to begin the introductions. "Guys, these are our new friends from the Hidden Snow village – Naja Daiku, Gojou Hikon and Yuse Samure. These are all the genin teams sent to participate in the Chuunin Exam from Konoha. They are (in order) Rock Lee, Hyuuga Neji, and Tenten."

"Yosh! It's a major honour to meet you all and I hope that your powers of youth shine through magnificently in the future ordeals that will be dealt and HMPT!" Lee's passionate praising was cut off abruptly by Tenten slamming her fist into his wide opened mouth.

"Please ignore him, he's clinically insane." She answered sweetly while all three members of the Snow team simply sweat dropped.

"Yo. Guess we meet once again, Dog-breath." Another familiar voice piped up as Kiba turned around, only to face the painted face of Kankurou.

"You guys are here also?" He asked, slightly fearfully, knowing full well the strengths of the Sabaku siblings.

"Of course, can't have you weak Konoha ninjas give the sand-leaf alliance a bad name, can we?" Kankurou taunted. But he was cut off abruptly when Temari turned out and knocked him on the back of his head.

"Will you be quiet?" She snapped angrily.

"Che. You're just annoyed because you're boy-toy is already a Chuunin and you can't harass him here since he's not here." Kankurou muttered under his breath.

Temari's eyes blazed in a haze of fury, and before Kankurou knew what was happening, his head was knocked down by a powerful swing from Temari's battle fan. "OWWWWWW!!!" Kankurou immediately ducked beneath another swing from Temari before running off with his life, followed closely by his furious sister.

"They are both clinically insane, please ignore them." The dry nasal reply from Gaara, who suddenly appeared out of no where, scared most of the Konoha Genins more than the display of sibling rivalry between Temari and Kankurou. This all happened while the Snow Shinobis continued to sweatdrop at the drama happening all around them.

After a while, the commotions died down and 2 more teams joined the larger group in waiting for the time limit to pass. Looking around them, the Konoha teams were surprised that so few teams made it in the first place. During their first Chuunin exam experience (back in Konoha), 18 teams had passed the first exam. Now, there were only 10 teams who have managed to reach the Kuunoki, and the first official exam haven't even started yet. How many Genins were going to be knocked out of the running for Chuunin, will they even be able to reach the standards of Chuunins here in the Kuunoki village?

These questions haunted the minds of the Genins even while they mentally categorised of which country's team had made it and which haven't. There were the 3 teams from Konoha (which had the largest contingent once again in a Chuunin exam), 1 team from snow, 1 team from Sound (here Ino glared heatedly at them), 1 team from Mist, 1 team from Stone, 1 team from Cloud, 1 team from Grass and 1 team from Sand. Overall there were 10 teams that had made it to the Kuunoki by the end of the 2 weeks time period.

Once the sun finally settled into the evening, a rustling sound was heard from one side of the clearing. All the Shinobis tensed in

anticipation, each pulling out a weapon in case these was an enemy attack. But instead of their imagined enemies, all that emerged from the surrounding bushlands were none other than the Exam proctors themselves – Jubei and his entourage of Gate Guardians.

The leader of the Gate Guardians swept his gaze across all of them before an undisguised sadistic smirk appeared on his face.

"Welcome Genins, to the Kuunokigakure no Sato. You guys are the best of the best that your villages are able to offer and for that, I congratulate you on actually finding your way here. Now is when the fun begins. I hope you're ready because there's no going back from now on. Come!"

End.

(1) Ryoko Dokudes, Seiko's mother and current leader of the Dokudes clan. You can find a brief outline of her character on my website. She's not really an important OC other than the fact that she'll become Sakura's main teacher through out her stay in the Kuunoki.

(2) Yes, that really is the full name of DNA. I got it off Wikipedia. By the way, I don't know whether the Naruto Universe have any insight onto human or animal DNA sequencing, but in this story – IT DOES.

(3) Mitochondrial DNA is the DNA sequences inherited from mothers only. It help distinguishes your heritage because it can be used to trace who your great great grandmothers are and where they come from, literary.

(4) This entire paragraph was copied off and then changed slightly by me. Please give all credits to the original writer of the Wikipedia article.

(5) I've got a photo of what I'm describing; links are on my profile's page.

(6) I've got a photo of what I'm describing; links are on my profile's page.

(7) If any of you are wondering why there are so many names, think of the Raishin Mountain Range like the Himalayan Mountains. It is literary a place littered with different mountains clustered all together, and only one of those mountains (the tallest mountain in fact) is called mount Tenju. A bit like Mount Everest being the tallest mountain in the entire Himalayan Mountain range.

(8) Neji was proclaimed the new Hyuuga heir apparent some chapters ago, as both Hinata and Hanabi abdicated from their positions.

Here you go. I know it's been a long wait, but since you guys got 3 chapters all together last time, I'm allowed a little break. Anyway, stay tuned for the next chapter – the 1st official stage of the Chuunin Exam starts!

IMPORTANT note – I've drawn up a picture (yes, this is a drawing) of what the Kuunoki looks like, please go to my profile's page and find the link there. I've labelled the various places on the map, and I've also done up a second version in colour. This will give you an idea of where the characters are at any one time during the rest of their stay in the kuunoki village. Enjoy!

Chunnin Exam 1st Stage

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Seven: 1st Exam

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ',
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: No real fighting exactly but a lot of mind manipulation and character development, sort of, I think. I'm also not going to go into detail for all the characters, just bits and pieces for most. In fact, since I can't fit all of them onto this one chapter, I'm just gonna cut it short and some characters will miss out. Hope you don't mind the jump scenes and still enjoy the chapter. Merry Christmas you all and have a happy new year!

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 27

After travelling through a bamboo forest path for several minutes, the teams of genins and the 10 Gate Guardians suddenly stopped walking before two worn looking wooden staircases. The two stair

cases stretched into the horizon up above where the genins stood, one to the left and the other to the right. Both staircases looked as if they've been chiselled out of the very mountain itself; if it hadn't been the fact that they were built from wood, people would have thought this was a natural structure. It looked so old and worn that it was a wonder the stairs were still usable today.

Having stopped their progress towards the stairs, Jubei and the other Gate Guardians turned around to face the genins all together.

"For those of you who have participated in previous Chunnin exams before, throw away your existing preconceptions! Because right here right now, you live by our rules; and we do things differently from what you're use to." Jubei's smirk was positively evil. A spark of glee could be seen in his eyes as he spoke with confidence and surety.

Grinning at the nervous expressions on the faces of some Genins, Akiko step forward in order to continue the spiel. "For example, instead of progressively cutting down the number of participants until the best ones are awarded the Chuunin rank; we do it by awarding points for good performance and taking away points for bad performances. Each of your teams have already gained points as you made your journey here, and from these points, your specified proctors have split them up evenly among the three members."

Without giving the Genins time to swallow the previous information, Koushiro immediately launched into the rest of the explanations. "From this moment forth, all the tests are individually based. If you do well in a test, then you gain more points for yourself. If you suck, then too bad, your points will be taken away. Once you've reached a certain number of points (of which I will not tell you what it is), you will automatically be granted the Chuunin rank as is set down by the rules of the Kuunoki. However, since this is an international event, we will still hold a tournament of fights in one and a half months time, since it's practically a prerequisite for all international Chuunin Examinations."

Unlike her brother, Hikari at least gave the Genins some time to process all of the information thrown at them, before beginning her part of the speech. "Now, onto the first exam! We'll be dropping you into a place where you can't escape, where you're completely alone, and definitely no way for you to reach your friends. This first exam is to test your mental strength instead of your physical strength so be prepared for some psychological manipulation. Basically, your task is to find a way out of the hell hole we'll be dumping you in. Use whatever means necessary in order to get out. If you do find a way out, great! You gain the maximum amount of points depending on the amount of time you used in order to escape. If you can't get out within the time limit we have scheduled for you (which by the way is 5 days), then sorry, points will be deducted from your own personal collection. Got that? Good."

Watching in silence as more and more of the Genins put forth their game face – an expression of calm, confidence or arrogance, Yami nodded to himself (as if approving of their actions) before concluding all the explanations regarding the first test. "One word of advice; to gain something, you have to give up something. And sometimes, by giving it up, it would release you from a heavy burden. This first test examines the strength of your character, in essence your willpower. I wish you all the best of luck."

With those abrupt words, all the genins were suddenly swallowed up by a large blob of living shadow, complete with tentacles reaching out to each individual genins and trapping them in its eternal grip. Pulled into the dark abyss, the genins didn't even have enough time to scream before they were completely consumed by the black matter, only leaving behind the members of the Gate Guardians.

A second of silence later, Akiko suddenly laughed out loud, unable to hold in her inner mirth anymore. "Ahaha! Did you see their shocked faces? It was hilarious!!"

Jubei's sadistic grin seems to hold a permanent place on his pale face. "Indeed. The fun has only just begun. Well! Let us get going as well. Remember, each of you will have 3 genins to proctor over."

Follows the rules that we agreed to originally and if we need anything changed, we go to Kaga-sensei in order to manipulate the individual shadow-realm we're proctoring. Understand? Lets go." A flash of light followed by a few twirling of Jubei's transportation rings and all the Gate guardians instantly disappeared from the grove in the bamboo path.

Shikamaru watched the clouds above him lazily. Now, to Shikamaru this was the life - having absolutely nothing to do but lay there on the comfortable grass and gaze at the sky all day long. Sighing lightly, Shikamaru closed his eyes and imagined himself living like this for the rest of his life. It would certainly be a dream comes true. Unfortunately for him, Sakura chose that very moment to come visit him, breaking his fantasy of a carefree life with her soft footsteps.

"Hey." She called out half-heartedly and was greeted back with a heavy sigh. "Geeze, don't look so excited to see me." She muttered sarcastically under her breath before plonking herself down beside his lazy form. "So, what have you been up to these few days? And why the hell are you lazing around anyway? Shouldn't you be training?"

Shikamaru sighed again before answering Sakura's unending questions. "Kaga-sensei is busy with organising the first stage of the chuunin Exam, with the rest of the Gate Guardians. He won't be instructing me for the next 3 to 4 days, so I've got nothing better to do but lie around and watch the clouds."

"Eh! The first exam has already started?! But where are the students? I haven't heard anyone come in through the main village gates or anything!?" Sakura exclaimed in surprise as she didn't know anything about this.

Shikamaru gave her a mild glare but then decided it was simply too troublesome to argue. "Yes, the first exam has already started, and no, they did not walk in through the doors or anything fancy like that. In fact, they haven't even reached the stairwells before they were all

pushed into the Shadow realm. As of now, I'd say they were forced to fight a psychological warfare."

"What do you mean by that?" Sakura wanted clarification, having never experienced anything like that during her Chuunin Exam participation.

"God! You're so troublesome." Shikamaru tried to ignore Sakura's whining voice as she continued to pester him for information, before finally giving up. He just hated dealing with girls. "Look! The kuunoki do things differently to the rest of the world. While other Shinobi countries test the Genins for their teamwork skills, information gathering skills, survival skills, knowledge over particular subjects, loyalty to their own villages and so on. The Kuunoki don't care about most of that stuff! They want to know about your mental capacities – what are you afraid of, what can break you, and what is it you fight for. By knowing a person psychologically, you'll be able to pick on their weakness. The Kuunoki Chuunin exams are going to drive each and every genin to the brink of going insane before they let up, just to find out how strong their willpower and personality is. After that is when they judge your physical abilities."

"As you know, within the Kuunoki village itself, there is a large range of specialty abilities and even the members of a single clan can have different abilities and techniques to their arsenal. They're not interested in who's stronger than whom; they're looking for who is more deserving of their help! Why do you think out of all the people in the world, only a few ever got to become apprentices here in the Kuunoki, Tsunade being one of the very lucky ones?" Shikamaru stared piercingly at Sakura before continuing on.

"It's because her teacher saw something in her that was worthy of guiding. Every person within the Kuunoki who had ever taken on an apprentice only has one main goal in teaching - to have their apprentice surpass their own power. Kaga-sensei is the same. He was the sensei of Jubei and Yami. Both of whom have grown to become extremely powerful, enough to overcome and surpass Kaga himself in certain circumstances. Once an apprentice becomes a

'master-level' Shinobi, they are no longer considered apprentices; and the old master is allowed to take on more apprentices. At the same time, the new masters (apprentices who have attained 'master-level' capabilities) can also start looking for their own apprentices. And the whole process starts again." Shikamaru concluded with a yawn, wondering whether there was any near by drinking water.

Sakura swallowed all the information Shikamaru had provided her like a dry sponge in the middle of the ocean. She was fascinated with how much Shikamaru had already analysed of Kuunoki society and all the knowledge he had attained from training with Kaga. She wished that she herself was that close to her mentor. Unfortunately for her, she was still stuck in the Library most days and struggling with the concepts of advance human biology. Until she had proven (both to herself and her new mentor) that she truly understood everything about the human anatomy, she doubted that Ryoko-sensei would teach her anything new. It wasn't anything personal towards Sakura or anything like that. It's just, given that if she doesn't even understand the theory, how would she ever be able to do the practical experiments?

Back to the original topic at hand, Sakura was feeling rather envious of Shikamaru. At times like this, she truly believed that he deserved the Chuunin vest that was awarded to him some 6 months ago, while she herself wasn't as confident in her own abilities. "If what you say is true, then why are there so few apprentices in the first place?" She asked in curiosity, truly wanted to know why it was so.

"It's because the Council 7 have a rule on apprentices. Each master is only allowed 3 apprentices in their lifetime. As such, the masters are usually very picky about who they chose to become apprentices in the first place. They only pick the best of the best, and only those who have an affinity with their own abilities. Kaga-sensei taught Jubei because Jubei had an affinity with seals and specialises in instantaneous teleportation – his rings are about as versatile as Kaga-sensei's shadows. Yami on the other hand, learnt from Kaga

his amazing manipulation of molecular particles – to the point where Yami has his own shadow-counterpart. Yami-senpai's Dyamon crystals act as his defence and offence at the same time, just as Kaga-sensei's shadow does for him. As for me, well, it's kinda obvious that I was only selected due to my affinity with Shadows." Shikamaru muttered half-heartedly, as if feeling a little overwhelmed by the expectations placed on him.

Even an idiot would feel rather small and insignificant if he were to be compared to the great powers of Yami and Jubei. That's why Shikamaru was finding himself more and more shadowed by his sempai's reputations. The expectations upon his shoulder, the burden of being as good as, if not better than, Kaga's past students – were slowly but surely drowning Shikamaru's inner peace, which is uncharacteristic of his personality. But what people don't understand or even thought possible, was that Shikamaru truly cares about what Kaga thinks of him as an apprentice. Sure, Kaga wasn't his father or anything like that, but Shikamaru had grown fond of the reticent shadow master and he really wants to make his teacher proud.

"I see." Sakura answered demurely. Even she could feel the undertone of sadness or some sort of tension. Sakura really didn't want to get involved in the problems between teacher and student so she didn't pursue this conversation any further. Hell, she had her own problems with Ryoko-sensei showing very little to no interests in her growth at the moment. It's just all too depressing.

Shaking away her thoughts forcefully, Sakura refocused on the original topic of discussion. "So the others are here already and undergoing the first exam. How many from Konoha do you think made it?" She asked tentatively, thinking about the last member of team seven as well as her best friend.

"They all did; which was surprising, considering Jubei-sempai was their main proctor." Shikamaru answered just as quickly, this time interested in the discussion as well.

"Really? That's great!" Sakura sighed in relief for a moment. But then her mood soured again as she thought about what kind of psychological torture her friends were undergoing. "I hope they're okay..." She murmured anxiously.

"So, how long do you think it'll take for the first one to break out?" Koushiro lounged on a large couch, eyes facing forward towards the trapped genins.

"I don't think any of them would be able to get out on the first day." Hikari answered confidently, leaning against the couch her brother was lying on.

"I wouldn't say that." Kaga answered from his meditative seating arrangement by the side of the couch. "Jubei was able to get out within the first day. In fact, if I remember correctly, he was able to escape within the first 4 to 5 hours. Quite a feat really..."

"Hmpt. Jubei's a genius and damn obsessive when it comes to training. The rest of the Gate Guardians weren't able to get through until the second day or so. I wouldn't put so much confidence in these brats." Koushiro continued to berate loudly as he remembered his time trapped within Kaga's shadow reflection technique. Those days were not fond days for the lightning affiliated teenager.

"We'll just wait and see what happens." Hikari concluded, her eyes never wavering from the large balls of black shadow floating still before them. Each giant ball was 1.5 metres in diameter and held a living, breathing person within them. There were 30 balls in all, and each ball held one of the chosen Chuunin Exam participants inside. Kaga had used his special shadow techniques in order to trap the genins into their own little capsules, and now had full control over what they feel, see and hear within the shadowed realm. It was like a high level Genjutsu had been placed on them; but in this case, they had to actively find a way to escape the shadow itself, instead of just a Genjutsu. This first round of examination had already proved too difficult to some, and far more a challenge than most have expected.

In deed, in this round, the strong willed and the weak willed will be deciphered among the genins.

xxx XXX xxx **(Lee)**

"Gai-sensei! Please stop! I don't want to fight you anymore!" Lee cried desperately as he dodged another powerful punch from his possessed teacher.

"Lee! You must learn the final stage of a Shinobi's life – the art of killing!" The usually passionate Taijutsu master had a strange glint of madness in his eyes and his mouth was wide open forming an unusually evil smirk. "Only those who strive to become the strongest can ever truly become strong. You must give up on something just as precious in return for something you truly desire. Now, fight me! Fight me like I'm the worse enemy in the world! Prove to me you can surpass my powers of youth!" The insane, green clad man shouted loudly, confusing his student even more with his jumbled speech.

"Gai-sensei! Stop! What is wrong with you!?" Lee called out again. Jumping over a high kick performed by his teacher, dodging another fist and cart wheeling away, Lee frowned at the silence from his master. "Why are you doing this? Answer me, Gai-sensei!" Lee was slowly becoming suspicious that this was not his sensei at all. Perhaps another person had Henged into his Sensei's form and is currently battling him. But that theory wasn't right either, because the person that was fighting him moves exactly as his beloved sensei would. The moves were exactly the same!

"Because it is right, because I wish to test my strength!" The Gai-look-a-like answered in justification.

"What the hell does that mean?" Frustrated at being kneed in the stomach and thrown some distance away, Lee could not help but feel more and more panicked at the continued assault of this opponent.

"I want to see how strong I truly am, Lee! I want to see how far I can push myself!" Gai's voice had calmed somewhat, even though his attacks had not. "I have trained you for many years and you have proven yourself to be a genius of hard work, perhaps more so than myself." He praised with sadistic glee, making Lee feel even more agitated than he already was. "It is time now, for me to see how far the both of us have come." The man knocked Lee away once more with a powerful Konoha Senpū before answering cryptically.

While Lee was struggling to get back to his feet, Gai looked over the boy with an unnatural calmness that spoke of deadly intention. "I trained you, Lee, not to enable you to fulfil your dream, but to fulfil **mine** ! I want to be the strongest Taijutsu master in the world. I want to fight someone who is just as strong as I am and still be able to defeat him. Don't you see, Lee? I trained you because I wanted you to become my ultimate challenge. I trained you to become the measurement of my strength. I trained you to become my equal and now I can finally crush you and prove my own strength!" The words were cold, so cold that Lee could not help but shiver. "**You are and have always been, just a measuring stick for me, my beautiful Lee!**" (1)

xxx XXX xxx (**Sasuke**)

" You won't be able to kill me, foolish little brother. If you do... you will become just like me. And then, there won't be any Uchiha's left in this world. And your precious clan will cease to exist..." An eerie voice rang out from the darkness. A vision soon shone through.

An older version of Sasuke slammed his Chidori charged arm into and all the way through the heart of his opponent. The man before him bled all over Sasuke's form, raining onto his face. However, the frozen, insane smirk upon Sasuke's face never wavered. This was what he lived for. It was for this moment that Sasuke had sacrificed all his time and energy working towards. Today... was the day he finally killed his older brother.

However, Sasuke was abruptly brought out of his musings by a shrill cry from behind him. "IIIEEEE! HANASE! (No! Stop!)"

*" **You are just like me... Foolish little brother...** " Itachi's final words were whispered right into Sasuke's ears before the once foreboding man literary collapsed onto himself, leaning his entire weight upon his younger brother's shoulders. Unceremoniously, Sasuke ripped his arm out of his brother's chest, knowing that he had struck all the way through the man's heart and he would definitely NOT survive this fight. Twisting around, Sasuke glared hatefully at the person who had dared interrupt his long awaited vengeance.*

Before him stood a boy of no older than 6 or 7, trembling upon the blood stained earth with absolute fear and a splice of pure, uncontrolled hatred within his mid-night black eyes. The boy had short black, spiky hair and wore a simple peasant's clothing. However, it was the eyes that captivated Sasuke. For in a split second, Sasuke noticed that those familiar black eyes turned blood red, with two dots swirling around the central pupil. There was no doubt in Sasuke's mind that this boy carried the same blood as his brother and himself. This was an Uchiha, the last of his sacred clan, other than himself.

" Well... Well... Well... What have we here?" The insane smile had returned as Sasuke walked slowly and intimidating towards the fear-ridden boy. Finally reaching him, Sasuke lowered himself and gripped tightly onto the boy's throat, slowly rising to a standing position pulling the boy up with him. "Heh... The bastard actually dared to BREED?"

The boy, having finally recovered from his shocked paralysis had given totally into his young rage, kicking and struggling against Sasuke's formidable grip fruitlessly, chocking and screaming in protest.

" Do you hate me, little one? Do you hate me for killing your sire?" Sasuke asked in deathly cold voice. The boy spat back at him,

rebellious to the extreme. Sasuke's smirk disappeared as he used his free hand to wipe the spit away. Tightening his grip, resulting in the boy whimpering in pain, Sasuke mercilessly activated his own Mangekyou Sharingan and induced the boy to suffer the effects of the Tsukiyomi, forcing the boy to relive his father's death for the next 48 hours straight.

The boy's resultant scream echoed through the entire clearing for several long minutes, before finally, the boy's young psyche collapsed, leaving the boy in a blank state of oblivion. Sasuke inched his way closer to the boy's ear and whispered to his nephew: "If you want to kill me... curse me... hate me... and live a long and unsightly life... Always run away and cling to your pitiful life. And some day... when you have the same eyes as me... come before me as an equal Sharingan user... only then shall we fight... only then will you honour your father's death."

" You are just like me... foolish little brother... "

"STOP!!!" Sasuke screamed at the top of his voice as he felt a thousand blades piercing his exposed and vulnerable chest, sides and legs. Having awoken and found himself strapped to a large white, metallic cross, Sasuke could do nothing more than scream as hundreds of his brother's doubles appeared out of nowhere and started piercing him time after time, which chanting the same words continuously. Had he not been completely distracted by the unending pain assaulting his body, Sasuke would have wondered why the hell he was being brainwashed.

He had completely forgotten about the Chuunin Exams, he had completely forgotten about his team mates. His entire reality was now focussed solely on his pain – be it physical pain, emotional pain or mental pain. The agony continued and for how long, Sasuke wasn't sure. But he knew that at some point, he finally fell into blissful unconsciousness.

xxx XXX xxx **(Neji)**

"I am proud of you my daughter." Hiashi gazed sadly at young Hinata before him. "My only regret is that you were born into the branch house, caged forever and unable to break free."

"It's okay, Otousan. I'm fine" Hinata mumbled even as she winced at the bruises left on her arm. She had been beaten by some Main house members some hours prior and was still wincing every now and then when she moves.

"I'm so sorry, dear Hinata. I'm sorry I could not birth you into the Main family..." Hiashi's heartfelt words were suddenly cut off by a sharp and cruel, but young voice.

"Shut it, old man! How dare you disrespect those of the main branch?" Neji glared at his so-called uncle with heated hatred. He didn't understand why his father always so favoured his uncle and their family. It's not like they're worth more than the other servants around the house. All members of the Branch house only have one purpose in life, and that is to serve and protect the members of the Main house. That was what Neji believed in and would always do so. "I'll teach you to bow to your superiors!"

"Otousan! NO!" Hinata cried as Neji activated the curse seal upon her dear father's forehead. "Please! Neji-nisama!" Hinata begged and pleaded. "Please stop hurting Otousan!" Her pearly white tears rained down her pale face as she struggled with her screaming father, rolling around on the floor.

"Shut up, you wench! You useless toad of a failure! You're nothing but a servant. How dare you try to stand in my way?" Neji deactivated the curse seal and raised his hand in preparation to slap the insolent girl's face, when suddenly, his arm was caught from behind.

"Who dares...? Otousama?" Neji's eyes widened as he gazed upon the angered and shamed face of his father.

"Neji." His father's voice was cold with fury, drowning out the groans of pain from Hiashi as well as the continued crying of Hinata.

"Enough." Pulling the boy away from the scene, Hizashi told Neji to stay put even while he returned to try and help Hiashi and Hinata off the floor.

Neji fumed silently at the special treatment his father bestowed upon his uncle and their family. It wasn't fair. Why was Hiashi so important? His father never even treated Neji with such gentleness and yet, here he was, helping some slaves onto their feet. Growling slightly, Neji stalked away in a fit of childish tantrum, silently promising himself that he would get back at his uncle and younger cousin for this insult.

An hour later, Hizashi bowed lowly upon the floor in front of his older brother. "I sincerely apologise for Neji's misbehaviour. I don't know what has gotten into that boy, but he's changed so much, it's almost as if he's a completely different person."

"It's fine, dear brother. He is the heir to the clan and holds the greatest potential. We must all do what is best for the clan. If it means that the boy and yourself must head the clan, then so be it." Hiashi's tired voice coughed as he stated the ugly truth of the matter.

"But it isn't right!" Hizashi slammed his fist onto the ground. "I am the younger one; I was born to be one of the Branch members. You were supposed to be head of the household. But when you defied the ruling of the Hyuuga Council of elders, they stripped you of your standing and place me and my son into the Main family, using Neji as an excuse. No matter how much talent and potential Neji truly holds, it still does not justify what the council had done to you, my dear brother!"

"What is done is done. There is nothing we can do to change it." Hiashi muttered tiredly, even while drinking the tea handed to him by Hinata.

"You have no idea how much the council elders spoil Neji, turning him into their puppet and literary changing his personality to suit their gains. Neji use to be such a good boy, quiet but gentle. And now look at him! Look at the monster he has become!" Hizashi purged himself upon his elder brother, needing someone desperately to hear his woes and sorrow. "I don't know what to do anymore, oniisama (Big Brother). I rarely get to even see Neji anymore and the more time he spends with the elders, the more they poison his mind. I don't know what to do. I just... I don't know what to do..." Hizashi collapsed upon himself just before Hinata rushed towards him and pulled him into an awkward hug.

Hiashi could only gaze sadly upon his younger brother's collapsed form. If he hadn't of gone against the Council's ruling, then this wouldn't have happened. But what's done is done and Neji turning into the cruel beast of a boy was just another sin upon his shoulders to bear.

Outside the room and with his Byakugan activated, Neji could hardly believe his eyes. Though he was far away enough to not be able to hear their conversations, he had taught himself how to lip-read as well as positioned himself into a good position to do so. To say Neji was shocked was probably the understatement of the year. Here was his father – someone he was ever so proud of – kneeling before a common slave. Sure, Neji had remembered a time (barely) when he was very young and had to suffer the expectation of becoming a Branch member. But unlike his father, Neji does not have a curse seal upon his forehead, for he was young enough at the time when the two families literary swapped places and status.

Had Neji been listening to the voice deep in his heart, he may not have done what he did later on. But as of this very moment, Neji only felt anger and hurt at being betrayed by his father. His pride as a member of the Main House would not, could not let this insult slide. As such, he silently crept away from where his father, uncle and cousin resides. Instead, he immediately ran to inform one of the council elders of his father's words, hoping that the elders would

punish his uncle and cousin, so that they're finally taken out of his hair.

Two days later, Neji's father, uncle and young Hinata were executed for treason against the clan. Neji watched in silence as his own father were burnt alive before his eyes. His heart felt cold and numb. Unsure of whether he felt guilty or just plain sick, Neji couldn't help but be completely enthralled by his father's final moments. He felt cold... so very cold that the iciest of materials in the world pale in comparison to the chill he felt up his spine. Just... so... cold. (2)

xxx XXX xxx **(Hikon)**

"Oneesan..." (3) Hikon choked out in a whisper. The hand around her neck tightened even more, resulting in Hikon's eyesight starting to waver in darkness due to a lack of oxygen. "Oneesan, it's me... Hikon." The short, dark haired girl tried once more. The only response back from her assailant was a grunt and the continued tightening of her throat.

"Kukuku... How many times must I remind you, sweet Hikon-chan? You're sister no longer remembers you. She doesn't even remember herself." A dark and cruel voice chuckled from the shadows around her.

"Hito-o...nee...san..." Hikon continued to try and claw her dear sister's hand away from her throat, but to no avail. / *This isn't real.* / She thought to herself. / *I don't... I don't even know what Hiko-oneesan looks like anymore.* / Her mind supplied logically. / *This isn't real.* / She mentally reaffirmed.

/ *Then that means I'm trapped in a Genjutsu.* / Hikon finally realised, but that doesn't help her situation as she whined slightly due to the slow collapse of her lungs. / *I have to get out of here... but how... I don't have time... time? What time... how long... I...* / Darkness finally claimed the floating form of Hikon, with both shadowed images of

her worse enemy (4) and her beloved sister disappearing into the abyss.

xxx XXX xxx **(Kiba)**

"It has to be done, Kiba. Akamaru's contaminated, there's nothing else we can do. I'm sorry." Tsunade spoke softly towards the young Inuzuka, having decided to brave the news herself instead of having an unsympathetic messenger do the job.

"But... But... he was... he was still..." Kiba's eyes burned with tears, his throat constricted to the point of suffocation and his heart felt crushed under a tonne of weights. / *This couldn't be happening, it just couldn't be happening. Akamaru was getting better. He was finally recovering and now this... it's just... so not fair.* / Kiba fought hard against the tears, his fear, shame, anger and self-loathing. / *Because of me... because of me... Akamaru... Akamaru has to die...?* / He couldn't fathom how this could happen all of a sudden and his mind was still in shock and denial of the entire situation.

Just this morning, he had taken his usual morning walk with his beloved doggy companion, now he was told that Akamaru had been contaminated with some sort of mutagen. And unless they want a mutated Akamaru on the loose and killing people, they had to kill him. It just wasn't fair. Akamaru hadn't done anything wrong except protecting Kiba from the mutagen in the first place. If anything, it should be Kiba that was to be terminated, not his faithful dog.

But there was nothing that could be done. Akamaru had to be killed, that was all there was to it. Unless Kiba wanted an uncontrolled and deformed Akamaru kill people and affect other animals with his mutated genes, this was the only thing he could do to save his beloved dog. Kiba would be damned to let another suffer the way his precious friend had, he would be damned to let Akamaru suffer for much longer either.

"Let... Let me do it... I have to... I have to be the one... to do it." Kiba stuttered as he uttered these words. Even while it tore his very soul apart to ask for this, he knew he would not be able to live with himself if he let any other person touch his dog. Akamaru was more than just a pet or companion. Akamaru was his partner, his best friend, the one and only person or creature that has ever stayed by his side through thick and thin. He was Kiba's family. And to let anyone else do this final act, it had to be Kiba and no one else – his pride and emotions demanded it.

Half an hour later, a numb and cold Kiba carried his dead dog to the garden behind his house. Slowly but surely, Kiba buried his beloved Akamaru under the old apple tree where they spend most of their childhood playing at. Finally, after everything was over, Kiba finally let himself cry.

"AAAAKKKKAAAAMMMMAAAARRRRUUUUU!" HE screamed towards the heavens in grief. The tight control he held over his raging emotions broke and tidal waves of anger, shame, grief, anguish, sorrow, self-desecration and much more swarmed into his being. */ Akamaru... how will I live without you by my side? How will I be able to live without you... /* The words echoed within Kiba's mind even while his body collapsed into the numbed shock he had been suffering under. Without further ado, darkness claimed the boy.

xxx XXX xxx (**Hinata**)

"O...tou...sama..." Hinata gasped quietly as her father's empty gaze looked down upon her from his hanging corpse, having been suspended 3 stories up from the ground.

"IIIIAAAA!!! This is all your fault, Oneesan! All your fault!! Hanabi slammed fist after fist onto Hinata's chest, literary pounding her breath right out of her currently constricted lungs. "If you hadn't forced the issue! If you hadn't been so weak! Otousama and the others wouldn't have died. Jubei-nisama wouldn't have died. Even Naruto-nisan and Neji wouldn't have died. This is **YOUR FAULT!!! I**

hate you! I HATE YOU!! " With those words, Hanabi stopped using her fist and instead struck her older sister with a deadly opened palm, thrusting forward a dangerous Jyuuken strike in point blank range.

The force of the attack slammed directly into Hinata's heart. She didn't even have the strength to cry before her eyes suddenly darkened and she fell into the abyss of eternity, never to open her eyes again. */ I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's all my fault! If I hadn't been so weak... if I hadn't been so useless, then the rest of my family and friends would have still been alive. It's all my fault! I wish I had taken their place and died... I wish... I wish I weren't so weak and useless... I wish I never existed... I wish I had never been born... /*

xxx XXX xxx **(Ino)**

Ino continued to jump from tree branch to tree branch. Now that Shikamaru and Haku had joined up with Sakura and Kiba, Ino had felt slightly more relieved that her ex-best friend would have at least some support. But that still didn't help her feel any less guilty for abandoning them to face the two enemies while she escaped with the Uchiha heir. */ STOP THINKING ABOUT THAT! Think about the mission! MUST COMPLETE THE MISSION! /* Ino ranted to herself mentally, doing her best to push aside her fear and guilt from the whole situation, though it was only natural for her to be worried.

However, her thoughts were brought to an abrupt halt when the barrel she was carrying suddenly jumped for no reason what so ever. The action was so sudden that it completely startled Ino and she almost slipped off her perch. Instead, she found some place large and stable enough to put down the barrel and decided to investigate what was wrong, not knowing why the "restrained" boy would suddenly fight back without saying anything.

Straight after the barrel's bottom touched the bottom of the large branch they were currently standing on, the black 'top' of the barrel started giving off smoke, as if it was burning itself out. */ Sasuke-kun?*

/ Ino could only guess as to the causes of this sudden change of events, but with hope in her heart, Ino clasped her hands together in a praying motion, hoping that the last of the Uchiha clan would once again triumph over evil, save her and then return with her to save Sakura and the others, as was the norm for heroes. However, her expectations were short lived.

With a loud 'Popping' sound, the top of the barrel burst open, flinging Ino's body away due to the massive discharge of Chakra and smoke. Hitting a nearby tree and sliding down onto another branch, Ino scrambled back up to try and see if Sasuke was hurt or if he was even alive. What she saw emerge out of the barrel wasn't something she'd ever seen before, nor was it something she ever hoped to see again.

A 'creature' was wearing a black shirt bearing the Uchiha symbol on its back, but this creature had long, spiky white hair and dark brownish skin running down its arms finally ending in sharp claw-like appendages. But most frightening of all was its Chakra. Ino could literary *feel* the large fusion of unnatural Chakra thrumming out of that creature's very body. It wasn't human – Ino thought. It couldn't be human and it couldn't be her hero. Ino cautiously lowered herself, getting into the ready position.

Before her very eyes, this creature shrank in size. Its hair simply grew shorter and shorter as if a 'reverse' button had been pressed somewhere that made the being go back into the past. And not only that, the hair changed colour too, growing darker and darker until it finally stabilised at the tone of midnight black colour. Its skin tone too, lightened dramatically until it finally settled on a light human skin-tone colour.

By now, Ino's mouth was hanging wide open, her eyes wide with silent shock, and her heart raced with undisclosed fear, for what was once a 'creature' of monstrous description had changed to her childhood crush – Uchiha Sasuke.

"Sa..." Ino gulped nervously. "Sasuke-kun?" She asked in a squeaky, whimpering voice. "Is that you?"

The figure turned left slightly, gazing back at her with cold, heartless eyes – eyes that were the colour of an unnatural yellow and the whiteness of a normal human eye had completely darkened into blackness. This wasn't a human eye she was looking at, Ino realised. Not only that, there were pulsing reddish patterns on Sasuke's face, on the skin right next to his left eye.

"Ino... huh?" A low growl hissed through Sasuke's lips. "Why are you here? Where is this place?" He demanded to know, his eyes never leaving the now frozen form of Ino, still staring at him with horror in her eyes. There was no way that could be her Sasuke, there was no way this was real.

"I... I'm here to rescue you... with the others... Um... Sakura, Shikamaru, Chouji, Neji, Tenten, Hakun-sempai, and Kiba. We... we came after you when we found out you... you were kidnapped by the sound. We... we defeated them... and are now bringing you back... back to Konoha... back home." Ino managed to stutter through an explanation, hoping that Sasuke would stop looking at her with such a deep sense of disdain and severe condescension, as if she was only an annoying fly not even worthy of being near his presence.

Sasuke's slightly insane eyes narrowed in anger at her answer. "YOU..." He growled as if accusing her of committing the worse sin in all of existence. " *YOU* ... are bringing me back to Konoha?" He asked in morbid fascination, as if it was the funniest thing he had ever heard and was wondering whether he should laugh or be angry.

/ This is... This is like before... during the Chuunin Exam... but much... much worse. / Ino could not find the courage to answer back so she only nodded slightly in reply, hoping that her Sasuke-kun would stop acting in such a strange fashion and return back to her beloved crush, back to that silent boy with an overpowering sense of confidence. However, her silent plea was not heard. In an instant, Ino felt an immense pain from the impact of something smashing into

her right cheek, bashing her away towards the left direction of where she had originally stood. Flinging through the air in high speed, Ino abruptly smashed into the thick trunk of a nearby tree, face first and then followed by the rest of her body, before she was slowly peeled away from the smashed surface of the trunk and left to fall.

Obviously delirious from pain due to the various impacts on her body and that she was still very dizzy and feeling completely uncoordinated with her body, Ino couldn't do a single thing as her body landed roughly onto a tree branch underneath her, halting her descend in a rather painful manner.

Bleeding from a split lip, her right eye was starting to swell due to the impact against the tree, her forehead was also bleeding due to several pieces of sharp splinters from the broken tree striking her; Ino also knew that both her cheeks were very bruised and probably turning black and blue. As for the rest of her body, she suspected that she had at least one or two cracked rib, and plenty of scratches, bruises and abrasions. / *Shxt! What the FXXK happened!* / Ino thought to herself as her body slowly recovered from the shock of the impact and her mind started running properly again.

Once her blurry vision had cleared, she could clearly see that there was a pair of feet standing right in front of her face. She lifted her eyes upward, following the pair of feet to a person's leg, up their chest and landed on Sasuke's slightly amused face, his eyes having returned to normal and his face completely pale without any signs of having been possessed by strange markings. / *Wha...* / Before Ino could even think up anything to say, the Uchiha boy had lifted his right leg backwards slightly, preparing for some kind of kicking action. Pushing Chakra into his right foot, Sasuke mercilessly smashed his feet into Ino's chest, flinging her away once again to rebound off another tree trunk before skidding to a final stop on a rather long and large branch.

Ino coughed out a deluge of blood from her mouth, sure that several of her ribs had been broken due to that one action alone, not only that, she started gasping for breath as well, suspected that one of

her cracked ribs and somehow punctured a lung. The pain was literary overwhelming. / *GOD! MAKE IT STOP!* / She mentally wailed as even breathing was becoming more and more difficult and laboured for her.

Sensing that her attacker had once again landed next to her prone form, Ino opened her eyes at her crush and have him a vicious glare, with hints of hurt, pain and betrayal visible in her eyes. "WHY!" She could only croak through her throat as she vomited blood again, trying desperately to clear the airways in order to bring in much needed oxygen. / *Why was he hurting her? Why was he doing this? /* Her mind began to give way to darkness. / *Hadn't they saved him/*

Sasuke tilted his eyes to the side slightly. After a few moments of calm, he finally decided to answer. "Because I can." The nonchalance of his words tore a hole into Ino's heart as her once adoration of the boy before her slowly shattered into a million pieces and she was only left feeling fear, incomprehension, pain, confusion and most of all, betrayal. / *I can't stop him... /* She realised too late. / *Sakura was able to call Sasuke-kun back from the darkness within him before... but I can't do that, I don't have that type of strength... I can't reach him. /* A stray tear dripped down the side of her face from her eyes. / *Sasuke-kun. Do you even know what you're doing? Are you even Sasuke-kun anymore? Will you recognise Sakura? Naruto? Your sensei? Are you... are you ever going to return to us? Why, Sasuke-kun? WHY!* / She mentally wailed.

Never in her life had she ever felt so helpless, and to a person she once idolised too. It hurt. It hurt her so much. This unimaginable pain that literary ate her heart bit by bit the longer the boy's indifferent gaze stayed on her prone form. She had never felt so used and abused before; she had never felt so cheated, deceived, so dirty and worthless in her entire life. Ino, who had always prided herself as being one of the strongest, smartest Konoichis in her year, had felt like the world had suddenly crumbled all around her leaving her with no control over anything. And she knew she was about to die, and by

the hands of this traitor, by the hands that would launch a thousand pains.

/ If I'm gonna die anyway, I won't give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream or seeing me cry. / This was Ino's only thought as she forced down the rest of the tears that wanted to fall from her eyes. This was the only way she could put up a last stance against this man who she had once practically worshipped but who had betrayed her heart, her dreams and (though indirectly and unintentionally) used her feelings against her. To Ino, Sasuke's betrayal of Konoha wasn't just about him betraying his village. His current actions (hurting Ino) had proved to the girl once and for all that he didn't care about anyone or anything that has to do with Konoha at all. This includes all the people he had ever met, all the people who had ever been close to him, and, especially, all the people who cared about him.

She, and Sakura, had been two of a large majority of the villagers in Konoha who had all felt a need to look after the boy after the Uchiha Massacre. They had all done their best to cheer the boy up, to give him a home, to welcome him. They were all willing to give their all to him, but all their attempts were returned with silence and contempt. But that didn't stop them from trying.

Sasuke hadn't just betrayed them by leaving; he was also betraying their trust, their hopes, and all their wasted efforts, all that the people of Konoha had ever tried to do for the last Uchiha heir. It really hurt. Like an uncontrollable snake, who bites its master once it has found certain freedoms, forgetting how well its master had ever treated it or looked after it. Sasuke was a snake, in Ino's eyes, a devious, black hearted snake and one that could never be trusted again.

Not caring about the savage glare directed at him, Sasuke slowly and calmly bent down, closing his hand around Ino's delicate looking neck and pulling her up slowly. The girl struggled violently against his hold, kicking him, punching him, and scratching him with her sharp nails but Sasuke ignored all that, they were futile actions anyway. When Ino grew desperate and tried to reach her kunai pouch to

retrieve a weapon, Sasuke quickly seized her wrist and twisted it to an unnatural angle, completely breaking her wrist bone in a way not dissimilar to how Itachi had once broken his wrist, tearing the muscles holding her hand to her arm. Not surprisingly, Ino screamed.

Hanging limply now from Sasuke's grip on her throat, Ino fought against the darkness that was about to consume her. Her right wrist was broken, her other was still thrumming from pain due to her previous injuries, her legs were tired and she could feel several of her thigh muscles had been pulled beforehand and was now throbbing. */ I don't want to die... I don't want to die... I don't want to die... /* Ino reiterated in her mind, not able to completely squash the hope that still resides in her, unable to let go of the animal instinct of survival no matter what stands in her way. And luckily for her, it seems fate was on her side this time.

Just before Ino was rendered completely unconscious due to the lack of oxygen reaching her lung, she could feel something prickly climbing up her unmoving body, first her legs, then her chest and finally the arm that gripped her throat. With a mighty forced twist of Sasuke's hand, Ino was free of his once crushing grip and pulled along a floating mass of brown substance that felt surprisingly like sand. Blinking the bright spots away from her vision, Ino tilted her head slightly in order to look at the person who somehow rescued her, only to find none other than Gaara of the Desert standing calmly beside her.

The silence in the air was so thick, you could really feel the tension that just simply hung there without any help from the two glaring opponents at each other, while Ino continued to gasp for breath through her bruised and sore throat and her punctured lung.

xxx XXX xxx (**Samure**)

Samure sat silently against the broken wagon, silhouetted by the fiery blaze before him. His eyes were blank as he gazed at the smouldering flames, igniting and burning everything in its path,

creating a literal wall of fire surrounding the negligent form of one boy. He could still hear the screams that had echoed through out their campsite just hours before hand, just hours before the ninjas raided and destroyed everything. Everything was taken or burn, all his belongings were gone and he wondered why he alone had survived the carnage. His parents and younger sister were gone, slaughtered just as the rest of his clan had been, but why leave him alone. It took a long time for Samure to understand why he was the only survivor of the massacre of his clan. The answer was simple; he had turned invisible and managed to stay quiet.

But unlike what really happened in the past – which was where he found the fortitude to stand up and literary walk away from the carnage that had once been his clan; in this dream or reality, Samure simply sat still and waited for the flames to consume him too.

/ This is wrong. / He thought to himself. / I've lived through this already. / I lived. / I survived. / His memories confirmed his thoughts. / Genjutsu? / Samure's analytical mind immediately survived his body's reaction to the vision before him. His heart rate was still calm, even before the sight of his mutilated mother, burnt father and decapitated sister. His senses were working as well as they usually do to. / High level Genjutsu perhaps? / Samure remembered all the explanations Hikon had ever given him regarding the differences between Genjutsu types as well as how to break them. / No. There's something more to this illusion. Something different to all the other Genjutsu Hikon had tested on us. There must be a seal somewhere controlling this place. And if there is a seal... I have the ability to break it. / Samure finally concluded before closing his eyes, ignoring the blood and gore that stood before him, he concentrated on the chakra lines that flowed around him and inside him. / I'll find it. It's just a matter of time. / He reassured himself.

xxx XXX xxx **(Gaara)**

"Monster!"

"Demon!"

"Just die, you hell spawn!"

A wave of sand later and the voices cease to be. Gaara looked upon his own face, his own body standing before him calmly. But this wasn't him. This double had a maniacal gleam on his face, the eyes were large and filled with madness, the smirk was evil and cruel to the extreme. This was Shukaku's version of him, the 'him' that had existed only months ago, before his defeat by the hands of Uzumaki Naruto, before he underwent the sealing by Uzumaki Ruri. This was the beast inside of him, his own dark reflection.

"You know. Nothing ever changes." His double spoke with his own voice. "You will always be the mass murderer that you are. You can't change your past, and you can't change your destiny."

Gaara's eyes remained calm. "I have changed." He answered succinctly.

His double's smirk widened to insane proportions. "That's what you think... But the truth is, you are still the uncontrollable killer you have always been... Don't believe me? Look behind you and see the truth." His double taunted in amusement.

Gaara slowly turned around to see what had his double in such a humorous mood. What he saw shocked him. Bodies upon bodies, blood and gore tainted the sand before him iron-red in colour. Whole buildings collapsed onto its sides, crushing those unfortunately enough to be inside or beneath them. What he saw was the entirety of the Sand Village in rubble. The stench of blood reached Gaara's nostrils and he vaguely winced at the amount of it he could smell. He could tell from the scent of dry sand tainted with blood that this attack had been caused by the crushing force of sand - his own technique.

"That's not all, look closer." Gaara could almost feel his double clinging on to his amusement and not laughing out loud. He ignored

his double's glee and proceeded to walk forward. It took him a while but he eventually reached what seems to be the gates of the village, which at the moment looked more like the start of a giant crater. It was there that he saw something that would break his heart.

Temari's dry, ashen face was spattered with stains of dry blood. Both her arms were ripped from her shoulders and left a bloodied, jagged hump where her upper arms used to be. Her legs were no better, having been crushed by the mighty power of compressed sand; it now looked nothing like a muscled leg but more like mashed potatoes.

Further along his journey, Gaara finally found Kankuro's body, of what's left of it at least. Pretty much all Gaara actually found was Kankuro's head and his right arm, the rest of his body was ripped into so many tiny pieces that it would be impossible to piece together even if you had all the pieces.

Upon seeing his siblings' mutilated bodies, Gaara couldn't help but feel a heavy throbbing pain within his heart, as if he was being crushed by the very sand used to crush his siblings. It hurt, like a burning sensation starting from the centre of his heart burning outward.

Gaara then began to feel a strange stinging sensation in his eyes. Wiping his eyes with his fingers, Gaara was surprised to see clear, white tears upon their tips. *I Am I crying? It's been so long since the last time I cried, I thought I had forgotten how to... I*

"There's only one technique that could cause this much damage to a human body." His double's amused voice rang out from behind him. "And you know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you? Of course you do, it's our favourite attack after all." The double continued to taunt.

"Sabaku Sousou." Gaara murmured, knowing the truth of behind the scene.

"The seal will not last forever, Gaara. And even if it did, it won't prevent the beast inside us to rise up again. We will one day succumb to our inner desires to rip everything apart. One day, we

will destroy the Sand and everything within it, including our dear sister and brother. One day, we will return to our true nature – that of a mass murderer." His double concluded on a serious note this time.

Gaara looked on with piercing eyes. "No. I will not allow myself to become the mindless killer I once was. I have changed, and I will never allow this to happen." He confirmed with resolution. "I will not fail." He finished his speech before summoning for a large amount of sand to his beckoning.

"You no longer exists! I have no need for the beast inside of me anymore. You will cease to be, right here, right now! I will crush you, and protect my precious people." Gaara shouted as the mountain of sand behind him continued to build. "I will crush this Genjutsu, Ninjutsu or whatever seal it is and find a way out. I refuse to lose!" With strong determination, Gaara planned to flood this entire reality with his sand in order to break free of the artificial world with brute force alone.

"Impossible. He's breaking through! And it's only been 5 hours since the start of the exam!" Koushiro abruptly sat up in surprise, watching in awe as sand somehow managed to move out of Gaara's trusty gourd and flooded the entire shadow sphere that the genin was trapped in.

The three proctors watched in silent admiration as the sand continued to flow out of the gourd, pressing harshly against the walls of the shadow ball, pushing and forcing its way out like mindless ants looking for a weakness.

"I can't keep this up for much longer." Kaga warned only a second before a crack appeared upon the shadowed ball entrapping Gaara's form.

"No way! Gaara almost broke Jubei's record for having the fastest time in breaking his own psyche and rebuilding it." Hikari noted the side wall clock's time with surprise before quickly jotting this moment

down on paper. This would definitely increase the point system in Gaara's favour.

It only took a few more minutes before Gaara finally broke out of the Kage Kekai (Shadow Barrier) and landed upon a cushion made out of sand beneath him. He breathed heavily even while he looked around, judging for any hostile enemies. What he found was three completely flabbergasted proctors (including Kaga) sitting or standing before him.

"Wow." Koushiro could only manage.

"Impressive! Extra points for this magnificent performance, congratulations Gaara-san! You received the second fastest time in breaking out of Kaga-san's kekai!" Hikari congratulated the Suna Nin quickly and cheerfully.

"Congratulations, Gaara-san. You can now leave the facility and meet up with Haruno-san and Shikamaru-kun outside the building. They will give you a tour of the place and assist you with anything you need." Kaga inserted himself with a calm voice, far more composed than Koushiro or Hikari in his explanations.

Gaara nodded and gave a vaguely wary stare at his sister and brother - still trapped within the shadowed balls – before he turned around and slowly walked towards the only door in the room.

End.

(1) Eheh. This is the result of mixing Gai's already psychotic personality and Itachi's transformation into the ultimate killer. Sorry, Gai-fans!

(2) I don't really know where this idea came from. But it suddenly struck me as fitting.

(3) 'Older Sister'

(4) For those of you who have read about Hikon's profile on my website, you will know that this person is none other than Orochimaru.

There you go. A completely truncated chapter. Hope you enjoy!

Anyway, no idea when the next chapter will come out, but it will be after the first stage of the Chuunin exam, all the genins would have now come out of the shadow balls (some by their own will, others not being able to make it until the time limit was up and therefore fail this section of the exam).

I hope I haven't disappointed any of you with my version of the exam so far. Stay tuned and please be patient for the next chapter.

Exam 2nd Stage Day 1 Fight 1

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Eight: 2nd Exam Day one Fight I

"Demon's talk" , /Thoughts/ , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ',
(FLASHBACK) , Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: Like the last chapter, this one will have an explanation of what they must do at the top followed by how the individual genins perform during the exam. Alright people, you got what you want now! **Battles galore** are all I can say. Enjoy!

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 28

"I'm so glad it's over and done with. I have to say, the first exam here made Konoha's look like child's play." Neji muttered under his breath. Even after two days of rest, he was still feeling mental fatigue, something he had not felt since the initial death of his father, and then again when Naruto defeated him during the Konoha Chuunin

exams. Overall, he was finding this entire experience none too pleasant.

"Tell me about it." Tenten slumped tiredly against her teammate, watching as he silently dozed off. "Hey." She nudged him slightly to awaken him once more. "When did you get out? You weren't there when I was freed." She asked, curious about when and how the supposed Hyuuga prodigy had fared against the intense mental warfare each of the Genins faced during their time within Kaga's special kage no kekai (Shadow barrier) technique.

"I freed myself half way through the third day or so they say. Supposedly, that's the average time for people to make their way out of that hell hole, that is, if they ever make their way out in the first place." Pausing, Neji grimaced as he remembered his time within the shadowed realm. "What about you? I was too tired to care about much else so I didn't check up on you. When did you get out?" He asked, now curious about how his teammate fared within the same environment.

Tenten tilted her head lowly in shame and self-loathing. "I didn't manage to escape." She muttered softly. "I reached the end of my limit, on the fifth day when Kaga and the other Gate Guardians freed the rest of us still trapped within the Shadow realm..." She stopped her explaining, feeling fearful of her team mate's scorn.

"That's not surprising. It was a hard test." Neji finally answered, trying to life Tenten's spirit up.

Frowning at Neji's attempt at consoling her, Tenten snorted. "Even Lee managed to get out on the forth day when he finally understood the message the nightmares were trying to tell him. While I... while I wasn't able to do anything..." She grumbled angrily.

Neji narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What was the 'message' that Lee understood?"

Tenten sighed. "He finally realised that he's too dependant on Gai-sensei; and that for him to earn a bright future he must walk his own path. Basically, he was shown the error of his ways if ever Gai-sensei were to betray his trust. That's not to say it would ever happen of course. God knows that Gai-sensei love Lee more than anything else in the world, but we all don't really want Lee to turn into a complete Gai-clone after all. So this small but significant change in his personality is a good thing for me. Don't you think?" Tenten smirked.

Neji could not help but nod in return. "What about you? What did you see that made you unable to break through?" He asked, curious about his female team mate's experiences.

Tenten's expression fell into a depressed look. "I'm nothing without my weapons. I rely on them too much. My speed is okay, but when I run out of weapons, then what... I'm useless without them." She explained the reasons being her visions, something that she was only able to realise AFTER the whole experience. "And you?"

Neji grimaced again. "I would have become a monster had I been in Hinata-sama's position from the very beginning. Even as a branch member, I was a jerk. If I had been born a Main family member, I would have been a complete jackass." Eyes turning shameful in remembrance, Neji continued his story. "Pride was my downfall. I would have cheated and betrayed anyone to stay on top, even..." Neji almost choked on his words. "Even my own father... the one who would sacrifice everything for me..." Turning away from Tenten, Neji tried his hardest to ignore the stinging sensation behind his eyes as he remembered the completely shocked and anguished gaze upon his father's face, the same face he had longed to see once more, just once. These new memories did nothing except tarnish his real memories of his father. Everything he held dear, he was re-evaluating, wondering whether he had taken them for granted, wondering when he would misuse them and then lose them in the process. It was a frightening awakening, but one Neji was grateful for, if only to shatter his reality and force him to mature a bit more.

Beside him, Tenten bit her lip in nervousness. She knew that the details Neji just explained was only the tip of the iceberg, but she also knew that when Neji didn't want to talk about it, there was nothing that could be done about it. Instead, she focused on making him take his mind off whatever path it was currently travelling with some random information. "Well, I asked around Sakura and Shikamaru to get all the gossip around and here is what I found out. Only Gaara-san, a girl from Sound and that guy from the Snow... Samure, I think his name was; were able to make it out during the first day. Kaga-san said that it was quite a feat for the three of them to make it out on the first day. During the second day, the people who made it out included that Hikon girl, Shino, Kankuro, Temari, another person from Sound, and one from Cloud. On the third day - this was the day that most people made it were the following: Hinata, Kiba, Chouji, yourself, all the Stone nins, two from Cloud country, two from Grass country and one from Mist. On the forth and last day, there were only two people who managed to claw their way out – yourself and this other person from Mist."

Sighing heavily again, Tenten's shoulders slumped in disappointment. "Of all of us from the Leaf, Ino, Sasuke and myself were the only ones that didn't make it. Now what the hell does that say about our personalities?" She whined childishly.

Now being his turn to try and take Tenten's attention away from her poor performance, Neji decided to change the subject entirely. "Shikamaru says that the next stage of the exam will start tomorrow. Or at least, the explanation of it – those were his words, not mine!" Neji exclaimed as Tenten looked at him with an eyebrow raised in confusion. "Anyway." Neji coughed. "You will get your chance then to impress the proctors and show them what you can do."

Unfortunately, Tenten's expression suddenly turned pale - in completely opposition to what Neji was trying to do in the first place. "Oh god! What if I screw up again! Neji! I'll never become a Chuunin at this rate and I'll definitely not be invited for an apprenticeship like Tsunade-sama! What will I do, Neji? What do I do?" In an

uncharacteristic fit of nervousness and self-doubt, Tenten pulled on Neji's sleeve insistently to look for comfort.

Neji could only stiffen in tenseness, completely shocked at his team mate's current behaviour and unsure of what to do in order to help her. She was the picture of confidence during their first Chuunin exam in Konoha. But after her defeat by Temari, and then her less than stellar performance against the Sound Ninja Kidoumaru (once again, her words, not his); Tenten had trained her butt off in order to become stronger but she seemed to have reached a stagnant level of performance at the moment. And without seeing any progress, she had started to undertake self-doubt, which is very uncharacteristic of her usually tom-boyish attitude. Then again, Tenten was a girl and she may be in that time-of-the-month thing, but Neji wouldn't know, would he? (1)

Just then, the two were interrupted by the loud announcement of their other team-mate's arrival. "Yo! You two! What are you two doing on such a fine day as this? You both should spend your youthful days out in the sun and training, like me!" Both Tenten and Neji's eyebrows twitched in annoyance at Lee's loud voice.

Though supposedly the boy has changed, he still didn't change ' **much** '. He still loved to wear his ugly green spandex, the even uglier orange leg warmers and still loved to do his 'good-guy' pose whenever possible. However, even an idiot would notice that though he was 'loud', he wasn't ' **as loud** ' as he normally would be; which was a consolation to all their ear's long suffering. / *Thank God for small mercies.* / This thought went through both Neji and Tenten's mind synonymously.

However, one good thing about Lee's presence was that it blasted away all of Tenten's previous self-doubt, and brought back her confidence. A few minutes of arguing between the two later found all three members of team Gai outside their given rooms, training lightly outside in the sun. With the sun shining on their faces once more, breathing in deeply the slightly cold and light air, the members of team Gai pushed away their uncertainties of their future, they

pushed away practically all thoughts and concentrated solely on training their mind and body to be the best they could be for tomorrow. After all, they wanted to do their best in order to impress all their proctors as well as any potential masters willing to take them on as apprentices. No matter what, tomorrow would be the day of reckoning, the day that defines the start of their future.

The next day found all the Chuunin potentials standing in a straight lines of three (2) within the Council Chamber. For most of them, this was also the first time they had the privilege to meet members of the renowned Uzumaki family as well as the infamous Seven High Councillors. The Konoha and Suna genins were also surprised by Naruto sudden appearance before them, standing confidently beside the Lady Oracle as an obvious member of her entourage. Having not seen him for close to two weeks straight, it was hard for the genins to associate this new version of Naruto with the Naruto they all knew, suffice to say, he looked and acted quite different from what they were use to. Wearing a pristine, long sleeved, high collared shirt and accompanying pants, Naruto really looked as regal and imperial as his position dictates, the Uzumaki heir, the next Uzumaki leader of the whole Kuunoki Gakure no Sato; the heir to this great and ancient village.

Once again, as if they had rehearsed the entire procedure before, during Naruto, Shikamaru and Sakura's first visit to the Council Chamber, the entire fiasco of introduction, naming and acknowledgement must be undertaken.

Sitting stiffly, Ruri nodded to all the genins in silent approval before launching into the pre-arranged speech once more. Though looking calm and serene, if anyone cared to look, Ruri definitely had a glint of boredom in her eyes. Even she could only take so much of all this stupid bureaucracy and tedium before becoming a little bored and frustrated.

"Name." Her stone cold voice was strong and demanding.

However, before any of the Genins were able to think about how to respond, their designated proctors stood before them and announced their presence to the Seven High Councillors. Jubei was the first to step up. "Team 9 from Konoha, consisting of: Hyuuga Neji, Rock Lee and Tenten."

After him was followed by Akiko: "Team 1 from Suna, consisting of: Sabaku no Gaara, Sabaku no Temari and Sabaku no Kankuro."

(3) This time, Hikari stepped forward: "Team 1 from Yuki (Snow), consisting of: Goujo Hikon, Yuse Samure and Naja Daiku."

Koushiro followed after his sister: "Team 5 from Kumo (Cloud), consisting of Sakeyama Asahi, Sakeyama Saporu and Waisa Bado."

Mishizu then stood forward in a militaristic fashion. "Team 15 from Kiri (Mist), consisting of Harate Eiji, Harate Echiko and Kapasu Juro."

Yami quietly stepped forward after Koushiro and in a clear voice he spoke: "Team 1 from Oto (Sound), consisting of Sasayaki Kageru, Yakushi Suzumi and Gengakku Mogoto."

Maya took a deep breath before shuffling forward towards her cousin. "Team 8 from Konoha, consisting of: Hyuuga Hinata, Inuzuka Kiba and Uchiha Sasuke." Releasing a sigh of relief at having accomplished her task, Maya shuffled away.

Katana stomped forward, needing some sort of ego-boost as practically everyone was taller than he was (excluding Seiko) while standing in a line. "Team 6 from Kusa (Grass): Asagiri Kaori, Midou Kei and Kawasaki Reiko."

Following in his friend's performance, Tori pranced forward in a sort-of twisted dance. "Team 2 from Iwa (Stone) comprise of Iwama Uzura, Jikizuka Tsubame and Rensa Ahiru."

Seiko then stepped forward, being the last of the Gate Guardians to present the team she was suppose to proctor over. Behind her, both

Chouji and Ino of team Asuma gulped in apprehension, realising that the sadistic little girl was to become their proctor now that Hikari could focus completely on Samure's team. "Team 10 from Konoha, Akimichi Chouji, Aburame Shino and Yamanaka Ino."

A moment of silence passed as everyone digested all the names that had been called out. The people from Cloud (the newly introduced Waisa especially) were commenting rather loudly regarding the presence of the two Hyuuga members. Two of the female stone ninjas were looking suspiciously at Sasuke, muttering under their breaths about him being the rumoured last of the Uchiha clan. As for the Konoha and Suna crew, they were especially weary of the Oto Ninjas, and who could blame them considering one of the Oto Ninja members had an incredible amount of resemblance to the traitorous snake Sannin - Orochimaru; and another member of the Oto team bear the name 'Yakushi', as in the same last name as 'Yakushi Kabuto' - another traitor of Konoha. Suffice to say, all talks and mutterings were brought to an abrupt end when Ruri's demanding voice suddenly rang through out the chamber.

"Silence!" Immediately silence followed. A moment later, Ruri spoke once more in a slightly calmer voice. "Acknowledged, you may all sit down now." Following in their proctor's (that is, the Gate Guardians) example, all the genins simply sat where they stood, directly on the clean floor beneath them. "Welcome to the Kuunoki Gakure no Sato and congratulations for making it this far. I wish you all the very best of luck for the upcoming stage of this special Chuunin Exam."

Pausing slightly, Ruri continued on with the rest of her speech. "After this next stage, for those of you who were lucky enough to be granted an apprenticeship, you will be invited to live with your new master and learn from them for the next month exclusively. For those of you who were **not** granted apprenticeship, you will still be able to train but the skills taught will be voluntary and you may have to find a willing teacher to teach you. By the end of the next month, we will be holding the final tournament of the Chuunin Exam in the neutral city of Bai Ling, on the borders of Hidden Leaf and Hidden Rain. This is

because the Kuunoki does not have a large enough stadium to cater for all the daimyos and the crowds that would traditionally be coming to watch the final Chuunin Exams. Not only that, the entrance to this village must also remain as secretive as we can possibly make it, hence the use of another place's stadium during this very public event. You will not need to travel to Bai Ling on your own; the Kuunoki will be responsible for your stay during the next month as well as your transportation to Bai Ling. However, the moment you reach Bai Ling, the Kuunoki is no longer responsible for your well being, and we will only be concerned with the smooth running of the Chuunin exam itself. Remember all I have said and please keep in mind that you are all representatives of your country. Do your country proud by performing impressively and acting maturely." With her final words, Ruri fell into silence again.

The next speaker, surprisingly, turned out to be none other than Naruto. His voice was calm and clear, with a dominating undertone inspiring respect and attention. "The second exam will begin tomorrow 9 am sharp at the community stadium and will probably last for the next 3 days. I hope you all know where that is located." A few of the genins nodded their head, and Naruto decided to continue. "Basically, it's a one on one battle in order for each of you to showcase your ninja skills to the entire population of the Kuunoki. If you've managed to impress and interest anyone of the Kuunoki audience, you may be granted an immediate apprenticeship on the spot. However, for those who are not granted apprenticeships immediately, you may still have a chance to impress someone by doing a second or even a third battle."

Pausing in order to let the excitement die down slightly, Naruto continued with his explanations. "However, unlike all other organised battles you have participated in before, this time, you get to choose your own opponents. You have until this evening to challenge any one of the other exam participants to be your opponent for tomorrow's first match. You can even challenge your own team mates if that's what you fancy. Once you have challenged someone, they cannot refuse the challenge, and the two of you are required to

register your names and your opponent's names with one of the proctors before you." He silently indicated the 10 smiling Gate Guardians sitting in a line. "Like I said before, whether you win or lose your first battle is not the important thing, the most important thing is for you to show us exactly what you're made of, exactly what you can do. If you feel that your first performance is not good enough, or you wish to try again for whatever reason, feel free to challenge a second opponent or even a third opponent to a fight."

Once again, Naruto paused in order to let the genins settle down a bit at this new situation. "Here are the rules to the exam: 1. you cannot challenge the same person twice. 2. no one can refuse a challenge. 3. you can only fight one battle per day. That's all. There are no other rules outside of those rules. For any questions, please hold on to them until tomorrow morning and your exam proctors will answer them then." With that said, Naruto stepped back down to stand beside his aunt.

This time, it was Kaga who stepped forward in order to progress to the next stage of the introduction. "Just a little bit of house keeping for you all. In order for your continual stay in the village, you must abide by these rules. Remember, breaking of any rules will result in either death or torture. Rule Number 1, No killing without authorisation of the 7 high councillors; number 2, No stealing; number 3, do not disrespect any local member of the kuunoki; number 4..." And so on and so forth, Kaga's rather bored voice echoed through out the chamber for the next hour and a half, resulting in many of the chuunin potentials falling asleep where ever they sat. Finally, Kaga concluded with: "And the final rule -, number 1477, never practice chakra control on the mountain sides of Mount Tenju, and I mean 'any' chakra control exercise. That is all. You may stand and leave the chamber as you wish."

Finally, after what felt like eternity, the Chuunin-hopefuls all dragged themselves up onto their numbed feet before hobbling their way out of the Council chamber to meet the bright and cheery light of the sun.

Sighing in relief, Daiku took this chance to look around himself, gazing at the faces of all the potential opponent for himself. "Well, let's get to it, shall we?" His tone was a lot more serious than what the Konoha Ninjas were use to. Now they were finally given the chance to see another side of the usually cheerful Daiku, the serious side.

As if his words broke a delicate spell over the genins, they started grouping themselves into their three man teams and facing off the opponents on other teams, wondering whom they were going to challenge and whom were going to challenge them.

Gaara stepped forward first, ignoring all the eyes that suddenly focussed right on him as he continued to walk calmly towards his intended opponent. "You." He stood directly in front of Samure, who had originally been sitting nonchalantly on a small stool next to his team mates. "I challenge you to the first fight." His words were met by utter silence, before Kankuro frowned in curiosity.

"Yo, Gaara. There's still plenty of fish out there in the sea, you don't need to be so hasty." He called, slightly curious as to why Gaara had chosen Samure as his opponent. Everyone who had ever known Gaara knows that he would only choose the strongest of competitors to face off against. And unfortunately, Samure did not look like a strong opponent with his tall lanky form and slim arms.

Without turning around, Gaara answered his brother's question. "Yuse Samure - the second person after myself who had the ability to break out of Kaga-san's Kage no Kekai technique within a time period of 8 hours and 40 minutes, just two hours after myself. You are strong, though you hide your strength. What say you to my challenge?"

Samure shrugged in nonchalance. "Sure. I accept your challenge, Gaara of the Sand." He answered calmly without rebutting Gaara's analysis of his strength level; after all, they would all get to find out eventually when they fight, so it doesn't matter what he hides now or show off later.

Having had that settled, Gaara went off to find one of the proctors in order to register his name and his opponents name, leaving behind two very dismayed members and one Yuse Samure of the Snow team. Once Gaara was out of sight, Daiku turned questioningly to his best friend. "You sure this is alright? He looks incredibly strong." Daiku asked rather nervously, though the glint of seriousness still resided in his eyes.

Samure shrugged again but smiled confidently. "I kinda like the idea of fighting such a strong opponent such as Gaara on my first fight. As you well know, I've never had to go all out before and this would be a good opportunity to find out where I stand with everyone else." He answered with an undertone of anticipation. "To tell you the truth... I'm excited."

Hikon nodded at Samure's sudden inspiration to fight. "You can choose a weak opponent and win your fight, but that's really not the point of this second exam. The point of all these fights is to be able to showcase your skills, namely, choose a strong opponent, go all out and do an impressive job of showcasing your abilities. Whether you win or lose is not important, just make sure you show all that you can do." Hikon explained, understanding the words that the Uzumaki heir had tried to hint to him during his speech.

Off to the side of the Snow team, all three teams from Konoha were huddled together in a rather defensive circle. "So, what do we do now?" Kiba asked in slight confusion and nervousness.

Ino snorted at him. "We follow in Gaara-san's example. Pick an opponent and challenge them!" She answered succinctly as if it was the most basic thing in the world.

Kiba growled back at her. "I know that! I'm just wondering who we should go for! I..." Kiba's words were suddenly cut off when a Cloud ninja confidently approached him with a air of superiority and laden arrogance.

"So, looks like the little tree huggers are scared of their big bad opponents, does hugging each other make you feel better?" The older teenage Cloud Nin sneered at them.

"Why you!?" Kiba was about to launch himself at the older Ninja when he was held back by Shino, his old team mate.

Shino's uncharacteristic cold voice broke Kiba's attention on the enemy ninja. "What do you want?"

The older boy, with spiky reddish brown hair on each side of his head, cool dark brown eyes and a superior smirk on his face gazed down upon Shino's nose from his extra height. "The name's Waisa Bado, and I challenge one of the Hyuuga cowards in your little group."

Neji narrowed his eyes in anger at the older teen's mocking tone. He was just about to accept the challenge when Hinata stood confidently before the challenger. "My name is Hyuuga Hinata, and I accept your challenge."

Neji widened his eyes at Hinata's sudden actions. Bado's confident smirk turned cruel with ambition. "Good, I'll see you tomorrow then, little girl." He turned swiftly and walked away, completely ignoring the heated gazes and glares going his way from the rest of the Konoha teams.

Pulling Hinata aside, Neji questioned her with an intense voice. "Why did you do that, Hinata-sama? Have you forgotten that the Hidden Cloud Village had always had something against us Hyuugas? Why did you accept his challenge? As your older cousin and protector, I should have been the one to accept the challenge!" Before he could say anymore, Neji was abruptly cut off by Hinata.

No longer stuttering due to the continual support of her younger sister and Naruto, as well as the presence of Maya, Hinata retorted Neji's complaints heatedly. "Neji-nisan. I do not need your protection, nor do I want it. The whole point of participating in a Chuunin exam

is to do MY personal best and showcase MY skills, not the skill of my supposed bodyguard, of which you are no longer one. Have you forgotten that I am no longer the Hyuuga heiress! You ARE! I am not going to let you or anyone else stand in my way of performing to the best of my ability right here, in this ancient but still proud state of a Ninja village. Don't you dare try to take that away from me, Neji. Don't you DARE!" Her uncharacteristic angry words broke Neji's concentration of words and actually made him think about his behaviour. After a moment's silence, Neji finally conceded that Hinata had won that argument. This amazed the other Konoha Ninjas as they have never seen Hinata exert herself in such a way before, nor had they seen Neji concede a point. Overall, it had been one hell of a day and it's only the beginning.

Time passed for all the Genins and by the end of the day, everyone had an opponent of whom they had either challenged themselves or had been challenged and they had accepted. Some were eagerly awaiting the next day to come sooner, others were sitting like a strung out wire full of tension and nervous energy, others could feel nothing but dread in the pit of their stomachs at the upcoming day's events. No matter what their situations, no matter what their thinking and no matter what they feel, the next day waits for no one. And it will come when it damn well pleases.

xxx XXX xxx (***Gaara Vs Samure***)

As explained on the previous day, all the genins made their way to the Kuunoki

Stadium. Though impressive in structure and looking more like a roman coliseum built to lean on the mountain side, the stadium was still just half the size of Konoha's own stadium. However, it was still big enough to fit all the Kuunoki population on the stands of the stadium, with the VIPs (namely, the Uzumaki members and the 7 high councillors) sitting on an opened platform directly carved out of

the mountain itself and still leaving enough room for the all the outside genins to sit while waiting for their match.

"Okay. Listen up everyone. The list of matches are organised on a first-come first serve basis. Basically the sooner you get both your name and your opponent's name registered by a Proctor, the sooner you get to fight. As such, by default, today's first match will be between Sabaku no Gaara and Yuse Samure. Everyone understand?" Kaga asked as he stood before the 3 lines of Genins grouped in their team formations.

Hearing nothing but silence, Kaga continued. "I will be the sole referee to these matches, while the Gate Guardians continue to act as your proctors. They will be the one to evaluate your scores by the end of your matches and calculate your overall ranking, while I have the authority to announce whose the winner and whose the looser, as well as ending the match whenever I feel the match is finished. At anytime, if any of you wish to quit due to the fact that you know you will lose anyway – just depending on the amount of injury you will be sustaining, you can concede your defeat and no extra points will be deducted. Now, are there any questions?"

"Can we kill our opponents?" The tall, thin and pale girl from the Sound spoke out in a dead voice.

"Yes, you are allowed to kill. However, I would like it very much if everyone remains alive by the end of the matches. After all, it's no fun if the person dies before they get the chance to fight a second or even a third challenge. If I feel that the match has progressed to such an extent that there is a clear winner, I will end the match prematurely without incident. During the fights, you are allowed to use anything you wish to help your in your fight. Remember that I will be creating a Kage Kekai around the two combatants for the following reasons: 1. so that any jutsus used within the arena will not harm the audience watching the match (4), and 2. so that once the match is finished and I dispel the jutsu, the arena will revert back to its original clean state. This will give no advantage to any of the later fighters (5). Now, here's the list of match ups for the first day:"

"Match one, as stated is Sabaku no Gaara versus Yuse Samure"

"Match two, Waisa Bado versus Hyuuga Hinata."

"Match three, Uchiha Sasuke versus Sasayaki Kageru."

"Match four, Hyuuga Neji versus Sakeyama Asahi."

"Match Five, Kawasaki Reiko versus Gengakku Mogoto."

"Match six, Sabaku no Temari versus Harate Echiko."

"Match seven, Gojou Hikon versus Sakeyama Saporu."

"Match eight, Inuzuka Kiba (and pet Akamaru) versus Asagiri Kaori."

"Match nine, Midou Kei versus Iwama Uzura."

"Match ten, Tenten versus Kapasu Juro."

"Match eleven, Jikizuka Tsubame versus Yamanaka Ino."

"Match twelve, Sabaku no Kankuro versus Aburame Shino."

"Match thirteen, Rock Lee versus Naja Daiku."

"Match fourteen, Rensa Ahiru versus Akimichi Chouji."

"And finally, match fifteen, Harate Eiji versus Yakushi Suzumi. (6)
Once a match has been finalised, I will call out for interested parties in the audience to see if anyone is willing to take any of two fighters for an apprentice. If one of you is granted an invitation to apprenticeship, it is your choice whether you accept the apprenticeship or not. If you did accept the invitation to become an apprentice, you are automatically withdrawn from fighting further battles and will be required to immediately pack your things in order to follow your new master to their home residence. For those of you who have not been given a chance at apprenticeship, I'm sorry but that that just means you will have to try and impress someone else

by performing another match or two. And in most cases, you still won't get invited. After the three day matches are over, and you've still not been granted any invitations, you are all free to pursue any potential teachers to train you whatever voluntary skills they wish to teach." Having finally finished with his main explanations, Kaga quickly launched into the start of the battles.

"Now, will Sabaku no Gaara and Yuse Samure please remain in the arena? The rest of you genins should follow Nara Shikamaru and Haruno Sakura..." Kaga paused slightly and indicated the two Nins standing behind him. "to the special stands set up for you." Waiting for a few minutes so that all the audience have finally settled down, Kaga began the much anticipated match up.

"First match, Sabaku no Gaara versus Yuse Samure, Hajime!" Kaga called out and Gaara immediately started the match off with a wave of sand erupting out of his trusty gourd and plunging towards Samure at a rapid speed. Samure jumped backwards to avoid the onslaught of sand before launching his own set of kunai with explosives tags attached. In the midst of the kunai was one smoke bomb.

When the kunai made contact with Gaara's sand, they instantly exploded, sending the mass of sand scattering into the wind. Following soon after, the smoke bomb erupted as well, creating a thick layer of smoky haze covering the entire arena, disrupting the audience's view as well as Gaara's own view.

Narrowing his eyes, Gaara decided against letting Samure have his way. Performing a short set of hand seals, Gaara took a deep breath before: "Fuuton: Mugen Sajin Daitopa! (Wind Element: Eternal Sandstorm Blast) (7) The wind force and sand from Gaara's technique blasted away Samure's smoke screen, revealing the snow ninja in the process of drawing an intricate seal on the ground.

"Shxt." Samure muttered underneath his breath even as he abandoned his unfinished seal while dodging Gaara's sand. Quickly counteracting with a technique of his own, Samure breathed out his

next attack. "Katon: Gokakyu no jutsu! (Flame Element: Grand Fireball Technique!)"

Up in the stands, Sasuke's eyes twitched as his beloved fire technique was performed by a Snow Ninja, something he wouldn't have expected at all.

Gaara blocked the fireball with a sudden rising wall made of hard earth and sand directly before him. The sand and earth on the outer wall of his raised shield melted and turned into glass, because even though Samure's attack was much smaller in scale than Sasuke's, he had upped the temperature by 5 times in order to instantly crystallise the sand. Unfortunately for Samure, Gaara had used external sand and earth for his raised wall, not his favoured sand from the gourd still strapped on his back.

Using the crystallised sand structure as a distraction, Gaara launched another wave of sand towards Samure, intended to capture the snow Nin in a Sabaku Kyuu (Desert Coffin). Samure barely managed to dodge the sand and ran some distance away, this time launching several Hyou Bakudan (Ice Bomb) at the converging sand, creating several large ice spikes all over the place and blocking Gaara's view of the Snow Ninja once more. Using this time carefully, Samure performed another set of seals, activating another of his own invented techniques. "Shunshin no Jutsu (Flash Step) (8)!" Instantly disappearing from his current location and therefore missing a wave of sand slamming into him. Samure reappeared back to where his incomplete seal was and quickly finished up the diagram while Gaara was looking for him.

This strange cat and mouse chase continued on for a while with Samure using Shunshin to avoid Gaara's sand as much as possible (even though he did get caught once and had to perform a mud Kawarimi to escape) while trying desperately to finish off his sealing technique. Finally, all seven points of the sealing jutsu is completely, and Samure jumped into the somersaulting over Gaara's form

throwing a nondescript blue coloured scroll into the air, and landed gracefully between two of his seven point seals. Biting his thumb and drawing a bit of blood, Samure slammed his opened palms directly into the centre of the two seals beside him. "Kuchiyose Misu! Hyoten: Koraseru no Jutsu! (Summoning water! Ice Element: Freeze technique!)" The once nondescript blue scroll that was still slowly dropping down from the air suddenly exploded into a mass of water, pouring down onto the still form of Gaara. Gaara used his sand to cover his body from the rain; he was unsure of whether the rain is something he should be worried about. However, even his compressed sand couldn't keep all the water from seeping through and dripping onto his body, after all, sand becomes wet and heavy with rain. However, he didn't have much time to contemplate how dangerous the rain was when Samure's second technique activated. The seven point seal that he had drawn onto the ground shimmered with light before it exploded with a burst of chakra. The temperature within the seven point sealing circle immediately dropped down to sub zero degrees, freezing all the water and sand instantly into crystallised ice. Even Gaara watched on in shock as his entire body froze within seconds, encasing him into a large block of ice in the centre of the seal.

After it technique was finished, Samure slumped forward. "Damn. That took up way too much chakra than anticipated!" Analysing his own body, Samure came to the conclusion that he had only about a quarter of his original body's chakra capacity left. Unfortunately for Samure, just before he started celebrating the victory of his match, sand suddenly gathered around him from behind. He didn't even have time to think before he was fully encased in sand compressed together to tighten its hold on him.

"Sabaku Kyuu, success." Gaara muttered as he slowly rose from the sand that suddenly bubbled up from the surface of the arena.

"Im... Impossible..." Samure managed to stutter out even while he shook uncomfortably within the sand encasement. He winced at the pain but ignored it in favour of looking at his ice statue. What he saw

both shocked and amazed him. The 'Gaara' inside his ice statue started cracking. Bits and pieces of 'skin' crumbled into sand and dropped into itself, revealing its hollow insides. / I see, a *sand bunshin*. *Damn! I've been caught!* / Samure thought to himself even while he activated his trump card technique, the one thing that could possibly get him out of this situation.

Ignoring the trapped boy for the moment, Gaara opted to release his favoured sand (and dissipated gourd) from the ice encasement. Performing a few hand seals, Gaara slammed his palms onto the ground. "Sabaku Taisho! (Desert Requiem)" The ground shook with heavy resistance to Gaara's chakra, instantly breaking the seven point seal that Samure had used so much energy and time creating, and resulting in the release of Shukaku's sand. The newly released sand, though still slightly wet from its once frozen state floated towards Gaara as a child would rush towards its mother. Happy that he had his sand back with him; Gaara noticed too late that Samure had somehow disrupted the chakra flow within the sand coffin that had entrapped him.

Samure wiggled distractedly, physically loosening the sands hold on him even while actively absorbing the chakra used to hold the particles together. Finally, after a few seconds, he was free and the sand simply fell onto the ground. "How did you get free?" Gaara asked suddenly, standing before the Snow ninja with a curious look on his face.

Samure took this time to gather even more chakra and rest for a bit. "I have a bloodline limit ability (9) that enables me to absorb the chakra from my surroundings, be they from non-living or living objects. Because this is a slow and consistent process, theoretically, I can never run out of chakra as I make my enemy's chakra (namely yours) my own."

"Really?" Gaara would of arched an eyebrow in inquisitiveness, that is, if he had an eyebrow in the first place. "Can you absorb this chakra?" He asked in a monotone voice as he suddenly released a barrage of demonic chakra. Samure watched in silent shock as the

demonic chakra continued to flow into the atmosphere. He knew that if he absorbed it, he could very well die.

"Shxt! I don't believe he just did that." Shikamaru cursed as he watched the ensuing battle.

"What the hell is that chakra?" Daiku muttered nervously from behind Shikamaru, thoroughly worried for his best friend.

"It's demonic Chakra. Gaara is one of those rare people known as Jinchuriki, people who house one of the bijuu demons inside of them." Shikamaru answered distractedly.

"What will the demonic chakra do?" This time, it was Hikon who asked, fists clenched tightly as she sat stiffly on the edge of her seat.

"Demonic chakra is inherently chaos energy (10); it does not complement normal human chakra at all. In fact, when they come into contact, there is a violent reaction and often, the demonic chakra will burn the normal human chakra or life energy because of its inherent chaotic and unstable nature. Samure has to avoid that chakra at all cost, or else it'll burn him to within an inch of his life." Shikamaru answered as his eyes narrowed in focus onto the two combatants currently fighting within the arena.

Using Shunshin to avoid the wave after wave of demonic chakra infused sand (literary forming claws with strange patterns on them), Samure couldn't help but wince in pain as one of the sand claws got in a lucky scratch against his vulnerable ribs. Even through his clothing (though slightly torn) Samure could feel the unnatural energy of Gaara's chakra burn upon his skin's surface like an acid. Even without looking, he knew that the marks upon his sides would be violently black or purple in colour, even while he felt the incredible pain of his burning flesh at the same time (11). Coming to a decision, Samure jumped back again to avoid another entourage of sand claws and wave before waving towards the examiner – in this case,

Kaga. "Examiner, I surrender. I am unable to battle anymore, due to the influx of poisonous chakra into my system." He answered calmly even while his hands turned towards his bruised and pained ribs.

Gaara immediately stopped his assault as he watched in silence when Samure raised his hand in forfeit. Kaga waited a moment longer before announcing: "Winner, Gaara of the Sand!" He then released his Kage no Kekai Jutsu (Shadow Barrier) while he waited patiently for the claps, cheers, whistles and encouragements from the audience (mostly from the participating genins) to die down before he continued with the rest of his pronouncements. "By order of the Kuunoki, is there anyone interested in taking either Gaara of the Sand, or Yuse Samure as an apprentice?"

One minute passed in silence.

"Going once." Kaga announced calmly, looking between Gaara's calm expression and Samure's anticipative yet nervous expression.

"Going twice." Kaga called out again. This time, Samure shut his eyes tightly and did a mental prayer to the gods.

"Going..." Kaga's voice was cut off by the sound of another.

"Dokudes Hana, I'm willing to take Yuse Samure as an apprentice." A deep voice called out from the audience. A tall man in dark blue robes stood on a central tier within the audience stands. His long, dark blue hair was tied in a top not at the top of his head. His presence alone demanded respect and reverence (12).

"As you wish." Kaga answered before turning his full attention to a shocked and amazed Samure. "Yuse Samure." Bringing the boy's focus back to him, Kaga instructed: "Go to your new master. From this point forth, you are exempt to fight in any further battles. Congratulations."

Nodding distractedly, Samure silently hobbled towards where his new master stood. Turning away from the slowly moving Samure,

Kaga called out to the attentions of the audience once more. "Is there anyone interested in taking Gaara of the Sand as an apprentice? Anyone? This is the last call!" Pausing for a moment, Kaga confirmed. "So be it. This concludes match one. Will Hyuuga Hinata and Waisa Bado of match two please come forward?"

Understanding Kaga's dismissal, Gaara turned around nonchalantly and started walking towards the audience stands where his siblings were currently seated. It didn't really matter to him whether he was granted an apprenticeship or not. In fact, he was counting on the fact that he doesn't get one, so that he could spend more time hanging out with the Lady Oracle and perhaps the Uzumaki heir. This suited him just fine.

"I don't believe this! Even though that Samure guy lost, he still got an invitation for apprenticeship! I mean hell! Gaara practically **dominated** the entire match and he got nothing in return! Geese, this is screwed up!" Kiba ranted on at the unfairness of it all, hiding his own personal fear and shock at the whole event.

"Get use to it, Kiba. This is how the Kuunoki is." Sakura snapped back, angry at the distraction. "Personally, I think Yuse-san is damn lucky to attain an apprenticeship with Dokudes Hana-sama. The guy's intimidating but he's also a seal master and second only to the head of the Dokudes clan, his own wife." She commented almost to herself, or to anyone really interested in listening.

"That just goes to prove that the Kuunoki population are only interested in teaching those who have an affinity with their own techniques. After all, Yuse-san also seems to be quite good in regard to seals, by his display of prowess." Shino nodded to himself, mentally calculating what chance there was of him gaining an apprenticeship invitation as well; his conclusion - not very likely.

xxx XXX xxx (***Bado Vs Hinata***)

As the noise slowly settled down to what they had been during the first match, Hinata and her opponent, Bado made their way to the centre of the arena.

"Second Match, Hyuuga Hinata versus Waiso Bado, begin!" Kaga announced right after he had stabilised a second Kage no Kekai (Shadow Barrier) surrounding the entire arena. With those words, Hinata immediately activated her Byakugan while Bado rushed right at her with fists ready.

"Is that guy an idiot? Rushing in with hand to hand combat against a HYUUGA!! Most morons would know never to fight a Hyuuga with Taijutsu!" Kiba scowled at the stupidity of the Cloud Nin. Then, he smiled as he imagined how easy Hinata would be able to defeat him. His fantasy came to an abrupt end the second the two combatants came into contact.

Hinata thrust forward with an opened palm directly into Bado's chest. The older and taller boy blocked it with a forearm before punching forward with his other fist. Hinata ducked, sidestepped and tapped against the boy's upper thigh, aiming to close one of the tenketsu she could see there. That's when things started turning bad for her. With her Byakugan activated, she could see clearly that her invading chakra simply disintegrated the moment it reached his skin, or more precisely, it was absorbed into his skin. */ What the hell?! /* Hinata didn't have time to finish the thought as she had to jump, performing a cart wheel and wheeled away from the older boy. */ Jyuuken has no affect on him?! /* She panicked slightly as the boy rushed towards her again, seemingly unaffected by her assault.

/ Try it again, maybe I just didn't see it properly the first time. / She encouraged herself as she blocked an incoming elbow, twisted around her opponent and successfully slammed an opened palm directly against the boy's chest. Once again, with her Byakugan focused on her opponent (this time with a close up view in the literal sense of the word), Hinata could see distinctly that her attack was

having absolutely no affect on her opponent. His tenketsu were just fine since all her chakra dissipated the second it made contact with his body. / *Impossible!* / Hinata had been so distracted by her frantic thoughts that she was too slow to react to her opponent's incoming knee right into her face. The impact of Bado's merciless knee smashed into Hinata's vulnerable face, crushing her nose and jaw. Her brain rocked with the force of the impact, eyes watered drastically with the pain, her entire world whirled with moment as her disorientated body staggered backwards several metres before tumbling down onto the ground.

"HINATA!!!" She vaguely heard her name being called out from some distance away, but she could not focus on anything else except the pain, and her entire body ached, most of all her head.

"HINATA!!! You bxstard! Let me go! I'm gonna kill that Fxcking Bxstard!! Let me GO!!!!" Kiba screamed at the top of his lungs, lunging forward towards the arena. If it wasn't for Shino and Sasuke grabbing onto the dog boy on both sides, he would have already rushed off towards the currently smug-looking Bado standing nonchalantly in the middle of the battle field.

"CALM DOWN, KIBA!" Sasuke growled at his new team mate. He too, felt an immense rage at watching how Hinata was badly injured by the merciless Cloud Nin, but he managed to suppress his anger and hate with an incredible strength of will. Now was not the time to attack the boy, especially when they're still in the middle of the match.

"Sit down now, Kiba. You're making yourself out to be an idiot!" Shino's harsh words sliced into Kiba's mind.

The dog boy whirled around and glared at Shino heatedly. "How dare you stay there and not feel anything! That's HINATA out there, getting the shxt beat out of her! How can you not feel angry! What kind of assxle are you, you...!" Kiba scolded with all his pent up anger.

Shino frowned dangerously. "I **do** feel angry. But there's nothing we can do! Are you saying you should rush down there, disqualify and embarrass both yourself and Hinata just so you can play the unwanted hero! Look around you, Kiba! This is the Chuunin Exams! Stop acting so stupid and think for once!" Shino's uncharacteristic outburst calmed Kiba more than any amount of yelling would do. Shino had always been the calmest of the three original members from Team Kurenai, and if Shino was showing any emotion on his face, then everyone knew the end of the world was near.

"Damn it!" Kiba slammed his clenched fist onto the chair beside him, eyes still angrily glaring at the form of Bado. His fury had not been dissipated in the least, but at least he was thinking with a clear head at the moment. At least, he would bid his time until he could punch that bxstard's face in himself.

Sitting behind Kiba, Shino and Sasuke, both Lee and Tenten were also having a rather difficult time trying to restrain Neji, whose uncharacteristic show of anger and violence was making everyone feel edgy. "Neji, sit down! Have some faith in Hinata's power of youth!" Lee urged the long haired boy to sit his bottom back down before he makes a nuisance of himself.

Neji literary growled in response to Lee's request before stating in a low voice: "Did you see what he did? That guy enhanced his knee cap with a large amount of chakra. Hinata-sama basically got hit with the impact of a ten tonne speeding train!" His fist clenched in fury, eyes narrowed and with his Byakugan activated, Neji looked like a barely restrained humanoid demon wanting to go on a rampage. Luckily for everyone, both Lee and Tenten had a tight hold of his shoulder and arms and somehow managed to force him down in order to watch the rest of the fight. After all, there was nothing they could do but cheer Hinata on.

Back on the battlefield, Hinata had slowly but surely gotten her head straightened once more. Raising both her hands to her bloodied face, Hinata silently concentrated her healing chakra to do its job of

healer her bruised face. Because her back was turned towards Bado at the time, she feigned being in pain while in actuality was using this opportunity to heal as much of the damage on her face as possible without wasting too much chakra.

"Well, looks like the big bad Hyuuga aren't so great after all!" Bado taunted from some distance away. Expressing a cruel smirk, he casually walked towards Hinata like a hunter towards his prey. He was definitely going to enjoy beating up a Hyuuga. After all, it was one of his late uncles that had tried to capture the Hyuuga Heir some years ago and was executed. In retribution, the hidden Cloud had demanded the death of the Hyuuga head but what they got in return was just a look-a-like Branch member. Since then, he had been taught from a young age that the Hyuugas were the scum of the universe and if they wanted to become a famous clan in their own right, they would have to defeat other famous clans in the world. And whose clans are more famous than Konoha's Hyuugas? Simply put, Bado was so looking forward to show off how much superior he was against members of the famed Hyuuga clan.

Unfortunately for him, Hinata chose that very moment to destroy his childish fantasy. Twisting around in a sudden movement, Hinata slashed upward with piercing fingers held together in a flat palm. Using his own perfect chakra control, Bado enhanced his body's reaction time, just enough for him to dodge the piercing hands of Hinata. Jumping back and away from the heavily breathing girl, Bado glared heatedly, annoyed that somehow she had managed to survive his original onslaught. That's when he felt some wet slid down his cheek. Distractedly smearing the liquid away from his face, Bado was shocked when his hand returned with blood upon his skin. He suddenly realised that Hinata had not attacked him using a normal Jyuuken thrust. Jyuuken wouldn't have broken his skin and made him bleed; instead, they attack his inner coil system and organs. Raising his eyes back at the determined face of Hinata, Bado finally recognised what the girl had done in the first place.

"What the hell did you do?" He growled lowly.

"Chakra no Mesu (Chakra scalpel)..." Hinata answered confidently. "...Except in this case, my version cuts both the internal blood vessel as well as the skin."

"A medic Nin." Bado finally concluded. Hinata didn't answer, she just ran forward in an attempt to slice the boy's torso diagonally. Bado gracefully side stepped the move, blocked and grab at Hinata's outstretched hand, jumped and did a twisting kick towards Hinata's still bruised head all at the same time. Hinata's head rolled backwards just in time to let Bado's feet fly pass without touching her. Locking her trapped hand in place, she suddenly jabbed forward with her other palm, this time intended to skewer the boy through his ribs. Bado, after landing from his rotated jump, blocked her attempt with another chakra enhanced knee before turning slightly and punching her with an elbow.

Released from Bado's grasp by the force of the elbow hit, Hinata gasped as she fell onto her knees, hands already working on healing her 2 broken ribs. "Che, even with Medical knowledge, you still suck as a ninja." Bado verbally assaulted her confidence.

Breathing heavily, Hinata had to forcefully calm herself before gathering chakra into her palms. Thrusting forward an opened palm, Hinata called out as she released the condensed chakra in one single blast. "Hakke Kuushou! (Eight Trigrams: Vaccum Palm)".

Reacting instinctively, Bado held his arms across his chest in an 'X' symbol, concentrating a large amount of chakra in that part of his body, creating an invisible shield. Hinata's blast of air and chakra impacted against the chakra shield and for a moment, the two were pushing against each other like two trains ramming head on. But in the end, one force finally gave way. Hinata's chakra blast rebounded from the shield and dissipated even while it slammed back into her prone body, forcing Hinata to tumble backwards once more.

"Hehe. And here I thought Hyuuga's had an absolute defence, looks like your so called absolute defence is nothing against my diamond chakra shield." Bado sneered while he walked arrogantly towards

the prone Hinata, still trying to heal the extra bruises and scrapes she had attained during her latest attempt. Struggling to her feet, Hinata distanced herself from her dangerous opponent as much as possible.

/ I can't do this for much longer. I've already wasted more than half my chakra just trying to keep myself from getting more injured. This man... He's incredibly dangerous. He has all the advantage against a Hyuuga. Even if my Byakugan is as developed as fathers, or I had advanced moves like Neji-nisan, I still don't think I can beat him. I need... I need to finish this fast and precise. I can't keep this up much longer. / Hinata thought to herself, spending some time to heal her scraped knee. Finally, deciding to put all her effort into one last attack, Hinata stood in an up-right position, hands ready to perform her one and only personalised attack.

With the Byakugan still activated, before Hinata appears the green divination symbol of the Hyuuga Jyuken style. Lifting one hand towards her lips, Hinata paused slightly before continuing to raise her hand. Once her right hand was in a vertical position, she quickly swiped it downward in a vertical cut. Raising her left hand up from her sides, she quickly swiped towards her right in a cross like fashion. Pulling both her hands down and performing the manoeuvre again, Hinata quickly builds up momentum as well as increasing her focus on her chakra. "Shugo Hakke! Rokujuu Yonshou! (Guardian of the 8 Divination seals: 64 Strikes)" With those words, she began to spin directly on the spot, shooting out thin lines of chakra from each palm. As her speed increased and her hand's motion continued, Hinata quickly created a large sphere of thing, laser like chakra lines protecting her within a 15 metre radius.

Bado tilted his head to the side in confusion. "Is that the famous Kaiten I keep hearing about?" Frowning curiously, Bado shook his head. "Doesn't look like it even if it's roundish in shape." Shrugging with nonchalance, Bado refocused his attention back on trying to beat the shxt out of his opponent. "Oh well, guess I'll just have to break every bone in her body just to prove how weak the Hyuugas

really are against us Cloud Nins." Pulling his hands together, Bado cracked his knuckles in a threatening manner, before widening his stance. Performing a short number of seals, he slammed his hands together into a prayer motion. Soon, small sparks of electricity started appearing around his closed palms. The small sparks slowly grew into large electrical charges wiping all around his arms, to his chest, all the way down to his legs. The massive charges of electricity soon turned a brilliant white in colour, surrounding Bado's entire body like a lightning shield. Finally, Bado moved.

He pushed his closed palms forward together so that both his index fingers now pointed directly forward instead of upwards like in a prayer. Taking a deep breath, Bado yelled at the top of his voice as he ran directly towards Hinata's twirling form. Within seconds, his lightning coated body crashed into Hinata's circular shield and a giant explosion of chakra and debris covered the entire arena, leaving the audience gasping for what happened (13).

"Shxt! I hope Hinata's okay!" Ino jumped to her feet, trying to see through all the smoke and haze to find out what had happened to the fellow Leaf Nin. All the people around her held their breaths in nervousness, hoping that the young Hyuuga had found some way to beat the odds and come out triumphant. But it was not to be.

Once the smoke clouds cleared, all could see that Bado had somehow managed to break Hinata's ultimate defence. In fact, he broke all the way through her technique and somehow managed to thrust his closed hands right into her lower ribs, obviously breaking a few with all his force. Hinata stilted slightly and vomited a large amount of blood, before curling in on herself some more. Bado slowly slid away from her wilting body, hands still closed together, palm against palm. The lightning and electricity that had once surrounded his body was no where to be found. And it wasn't until a second later that the audience finally understood where it had all gone. Hinata's silent suddenly started to shake violently. It was

shaking so violently that it fell onto the ground like a rag doll still shaking viciously. Somehow, Bado had transferred all the electricity he had used for his chakra shield directly into Hinata's nervous system. And her poor abused body just could not take the stress anymore, erupting in violent shakes and quickly rendering her unconscious to all the pain.

"Ah! I win!" Bado thrust his fist in the air as a sign of victory.

"Hyuuga Hinata is no longer able to battle. Winner of the second match, Waisa Bado!" Kaga announced as he released the Shadow barrier holding the combatants inside. There were some cheers and encouragements from the audience, but all the members of the Leaf team were glaring daggers at the Cloud victor. Kiba and Neji had to be restrained once more from rushing down into the arena and killing the boy straight off. Mean while, Dokudes Seiko and Raitei Hikari came forward to collect the trembling yet unconscious Hinata. They carried her gently away to one of the healing rooms where Seiko was bound to heal her to the best of her ability. But that did nothing to lessen the hatred held by the Leaf Ninjas in the audience, all wanting to rip Bado piece by piece.

Once again, Kaga ignored the tension in the air before requesting for anyone interested in taking either Hyuuga Hinata or Waisa Bado for an apprentice. Five minutes pass in silence as Kaga called once, twice and a third time for interested parties. In the end, he had to settle that no one was interested in taking either Genins as apprentices and left it at that. Bado huffed in a childish manner as he made his way from the stadium, chin tilted upward with arrogance. Kaga ignored the boy's behaviour and called forth for the third match competitors. "Will Uchiha Sasuke and Sasayaki Kageru please make their way down to the arena floor?"

To be continued.

(1) Heh. I wanted to add some light humour there. I've just come to realise that Tenten is a very marginalised character. Other than her

love for weapons and her tomboyish style, we don't really know much about her at all. So I just thought I'd take this opportunity to develop her character a bit more than I have in the past. Hope you Tenten-fans out there enjoy!

(2) Think how Naruto and the others stood just before the start of the Chuunin Preliminary exam in Konoha. Like that basically, so you've basically got ten teams standing in lines of three.

(3) All of the mentioned Original Characters have their own character profiles, images and other bits too done about them. You can find them all at my website. Just go to my profile's page and follow the links there.

(4) Basically, in using Kaga's jutsu, no one will be able to do what Kabuto did during the Cannon Chuunin Exams where he affected the audience with his Genjutsu, and how Temari's wind was also able to cause some harm to the audience. This protection is solely for the watching audience's sake.

(5) I'm referring to how Shikamaru (in the original Cannon series) used the hole dug up by Naruto's previous match in order to win his. If all the matches are played on an the same exact grounds without any changes happening to them, then theoretically, no one should have an advantage over another due to the resultant battles of previous match ups. Hope that make sense.

(6) I hope the match ups aren't disappointing. It took me forever to get the matched up and I kept on changing my mind. I tried to keep it so that the Leaf Nins don't fight among themselves. With the exception being the Kankuro Vs Shino fight, pretty much all the others will be completely original fights that I have to think up. For the original creators of the OCs, I'd just like to warn you all that from now on, the OCs belongs to me. I will do to them as I see fit, so please don't complain after the chapters are done that you didn't like how I portrayed them or have them act in certain ways. Once again, thanks for all your help in creating them, but now that they are in my hands, I have to find a way for them to fit in with the story, and

certain match ups just won't work. Be patient and hopefully, I'll do you all justice by the OCs.

(7) This is the wind sand blast technique used by deformed Gaara in the Naruto Cannon series. But in this case, Gaara's in full control of the technique using his own chakra, therefore, the technique isn't as strong as the cannon version. Overall, this Gaara created more wind than sand within the blast. Hope this makes sense.

(8) I'm using the definition from Bleach here. Flash step just seems so much more exciting. This version of Shunshin is different from the Yondaime's as well as the deceased Uchiha Shisui's. This is Samure's own version of Shunshin, and it's weaker than most Shunshin but still effective.

(9) Similar to the bloodline displayed by Akado Yoroï, but different in practice. Samure is able to absorb anything within a 50 to 100 metre radius around his body automatically, so he doesn't need to actually touch someone in order to absorb their chakra. It is a much slower process than Yoroï but it is also much more stable, meaning that Samure will not go into chakra overload or anything like that. However, Samure can't hold this bloodline ability for too long, because eventually, he'll become bloated with too much chakra and it'll waste away his body.

(10) Completely my own theory. There are two types of chakra in this (Naruto) world. The normal chakra displayed by humans, other living and non-living entities; and the demonic chakra which are held by demons or sentient beings born of chaos. I will also refer to them as chaos chakra or chaos energy (for demonic chakra), and order chakra or life energy (for normal chakra because it brings order and normal life). Chaos energy is inherently chaotic as it is unstable, but it is also powerful and primal (wild). Demons are born from an accumulation of chaos energy once they have formed a consciousness to recognise itself as a sentient being. Life energy, however, follows the rules of nature in that living creatures are born under special circumstances (e.g. mating and reproduction) and then when they run out of their inherent life energy, they die. Obviously,

chaos energy lasts longer than life energy, but there is also a majority of life energy compared to chaos energy in the world. It's a strange balance. There is less chaos energy but it's more powerful and uncontrollable. There is more life energy in the world but they don't last as long, however, these energy can be cultivated into chakra. Hope that makes sense.

(11) Think how Sakura reacted when Kyuubified Naruto turned on her in the Manga Cannon series – book 30.

(12) Dokudes Hana is the husband of Dokudes Ryoka (Sakura's new teacher) and the father of Dokudes Seiko (one of the Gate Guardians). But he is not an important character so you can pretty much forget about him from this point forth.

(13) Similar to what happened between Neji and Naruto in the Cannon manga and Anime, where Naruto charged Neji's kaiten with his Kyuubified chakra punch.

Please don't kill me in regard to the torture I put Hinata through. I had to do it! It was important to the plotline of this story! It's the only way to showcase Bado's nature in battle as well as how far Hinata still has to go in order to become a Chuunin.

On a completely different note, for those lovely people (named at the beginning of this chapter) who helped supply me the wonderful OCs, they are now mine in interpret and portray. PLEASE DO NOT email me just to tell me I've portrayed them wrongly from your own original conceptions. These are my interpretations and portrays, and I will do them as I see fit since I'm the one that has to find a way to incorporate them into the story.

Anyway, stay tune for the next chapter, which may come some weeks (or maybe a month) later. This is because I'm taking a small holiday (away from work, away from home and away from writing) to enjoy myself and relax. Hope you enjoy the chapter so far. Please read and review. More importantly, please answer the questions below!!!

Question! Question! I need some advice!

- 1.** Would you guys like me to write out the entire fight scenes for all the Konoha and Suna crew (like above with Gaara and Hinata)? Or would small highlights here and there be sufficient?
- 2.** Would you guys want me to concentrate on JUST the Konoha and Suna crew, or would you be interested in the fights between the OCs as well? Because (as you have seen from my website), each OC has a background and unique abilities. But I don't want to overwhelm you all, so please tell me how you want me to write the next few chapters.

Please answer via the nice little review button on the bottom of the page or you can PM me from my profile's page. Thanks! I hope you all enjoy this chapter just as much as I liked writing it.

Just a reminder, there is also a link to a picture I drew of the 7 point sealing system used by Samure on my profile's page.

Exam 2nd Stage Day 1 Fight 2

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Twenty-Nine: 2nd Exam Day one Fight II

" **Demon's talk** " / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: **Battles galore! God! I'm ploughing through all the first series of fights all in one chapter!** Enough said.

Sorry about the long wait, but I've been plagued by laziness and a lack of ideas. I'm also trying my damn hardest to keep this story interesting. If I find that I'm writing dull stuff, I just stop writing until I get more inspiration. I've always hated how some stories simply just die off after a while (lack of suspense or interesting things happening), and I refuse to have Faith die in such a way. But some good news is here, I'm planning to have Restoration of Faith end once the Hidden Air Chuunin Exams are over and done with. Should be another 5 chapters I hope. But knowing me, I'll probably find some way to stretch it even further... Why do I always have to make more work for myself... T.T

On a completely different note, one of my reviewers asked me: "Sasuke didn't make it through the mental exam, yet he somehow managed to make it into the one-on-one battles... (why?)"

I would have sent a message back to reply but there was no email address for me to use, so I'll just write out my answers here: "If

you've read chapter 27 correctly, you'll know that my exam system is a point scoring system. Even if you screw up during one stage, you can make up for it on a second stage. Only until the end is when you find out how much you've actually scored and whether or not you pass the whole thing. In this sense, Sasuke can make it through all the one-on-one battles and even the finale, it doesn't matter how bad he did during the mental exam." Hope that answers that.

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 29

"Will Uchiha Sasuke and Sasayaki Kageru please make their way down to the arena floor?" Kaga called out in apparent boredom. The two mentioned Genins walked slowly towards the centre of the battlefield, silent and intimidating in their posture.

"Match three! Uchiha Sasuke versus Sasayaki Kageru, hajime!" Kaga announced after he had reactivated the Kage no Keikai (Shadow barrier technique).

Without further ado, Sasuke immediately launched into his favourite set of seals and exclaimed in a loud voice: "Katon! Gokakyuu no Jutsu! (Fire element: Grand Fireball Technique)"

The giant fire ball flew towards Kageru in an instant, while the Orochimaru-look-a-like simply stood there waiting for the fireball to hit. She raised her left hand slowly and calmly. A split second before the fireball impacts against her raised, open palm, she activated the metallic emulator (1) device that was strapped around her left wrist. A sudden burst of high pitch sound wave echoed all over the arena, forcing audiences to block their ears in pain. Even Sasuke had to

duck and cover his ears as the pain of the vibration within his ear drums was too much for him to even keep his balance on his feet. The high pitched echo blasted against the grand fireball and in that instant, the smouldering sphere of flame was smothered and dispersing into tiny, non-dangerous smoke and ash particles. With the immediate threat against her firmly resolved Kageru dropped her hand back down and stood in a nonchalant stance, as if already bored of the fight and waited patiently for Sasuke to throw the next barrage of attacks.

Sasuke gritted his teeth as he struggled onto his feet. */ What the hell was that attack? There were no hand seals at all. It was like Hinata's burst of Chakra, only this one seems to be made of sound. But how can sound do things like that? How can sound be so dangerous?! /*

"What the hell happened?" Ino groaned as she struggled into a sitting position.

Sitting beside her, Shikamaru gave a heavy sigh. "Sound." He answered the original question. "Sound is caused by vibrations travelling through air particles or other medium. Sound comes in the form of wavelengths; these waves alter pressure and cause various compression and rarefaction in the medium that it's travelling through (2). Particles in the medium are then displaced by the wave and oscillates, somewhat weakening the molecular bonds holding it together. Theoretically, if sound comes in the form of a high pitched, fast paced frequency, it could cause matter to oscillate to such an extent that it breaks the matter up, creating what we call a sonic boom affect." Shikamaru took a moment to explain what he remembered from reading about the theory of sound. He then tried to explain it in layman's terms. "Basically, it means that the sound that Sound Nin just emitted was travelling at such a speed, it broke the sound barrier and the rapid compression and decompression of pressure simply blasted and dispersed Sasuke's attack. A perfect blend of defensive shielding and offensive weaponry at the same time." Though still using highly articulate words, Shikamaru

somehow managed to get his point across to the rest of the Leaf Shinobi.

After a few moments of silence, Sasuke stabilised himself enough to attack once more. With his Sharingan activated, the last of the Uchiha clan rushed towards Kageru, intending to fight with Taijutsu. Kageru was smooth and efficient as she blocked, ducked, sidestepped and simply moved around Sasuke's barrage of hits, punches, kicks and jumps. Although Sasuke had his Sharingan activated, able to properly capture all of Kageru's moves, she was still a might superior in speed and grace. She somehow managed to evade all of Sasuke's attacks without a single scratch on her body through out the whole 5 minute Taijutsu battle.

Getting frustrated from the less than effective Taijutsu battle, Sasuke jumped and twirled in midair, while at the same time reaching into his ninja pouch to gather up some steel wire. Throwing the wire directly towards Kageru, he released some of his chakra into the wire lining in order for him to control the direction and speed of his chosen weapon. The wire rapidly wrapped around Kageru and entrapped her like a chain. However, just before Sasuke could perform the intended Ryuuka no Jutsu, Kageru's form melted into a puddle of mud. / *Bunshin?* /

Sasuke didn't have enough time to react when several snakes suddenly launched out of the ground directly underneath him, wrapping around his torso, arms and legs, immobilising him completely. Sasuke glared heatedly as Kageru slowly manifested from the ground before him, the snakes tightening their grip on his body. "Seneai Jyashu! (Shadow Snake Hands.)"

"Who ARE YOU?" Sasuke growled out in hate and frustration. "How are you able to perform the same Justus as Orochimaru?!" The watching audience silenced immediately at Sasuke's exclamation. Most of them were aware who Orochimaru is, after all, it isn't everyday the leader of a small Ninja village like Oto challenged the mighty power of Konoha and somehow managed to survive. Some

of the viewers even tensed up at the mention of the hated name, especially Hikon, Temari and Kankuro.

Kageru tilted her head to the side slightly. "Does it matter?" Her voice was ice impersonate.

"Hell Yes! Were you sent here to retrieve me like all the other Oto goons? Is he still trying to get his hands on the Sharingan? Answer me, damn it!" Sasuke shouted with uncontrolled emotion. Though he had finally decided to live the rest of his life as a Konoha Shinobi, he had not forgotten about the curse seal, nor did all the troubles he had gone through since his first meeting with Orochimaru. Overall, Sasuke blamed Orochimaru for all his troubles, literary. Everything that had gone bad for him for the last year or so, he had blamed it solely on Orochimaru's presence. As such, seeing a replica of the hated Sannin just made Sasuke's blood boil.

"I am not interested in you, pathetic human, and neither is my master." Kageru finally answered in a cold, emotionless voice. Her golden eyes narrowed into slits at the insult. "Whether he wishes to use you or not depends solely on his whim. Do not forget, you can be replaced just as easily as anyone else, pawn." She finished her derogatory comments before commanding one of the snakes that had the last Uchiha trapped bite the boy on the neck, just above where the curse seal resides. Massive pain suddenly erupted from the bite of the poisonous snake upon his skin and Sasuke couldn't help but scream out in agony. It was like Orochimaru biting and instigating the curse seal all over again. It hurt like nothing else would, that burning sensation upon his shoulders making him literary unable to move due to the fire that runs through his sensitive nerves and muscles. Suffice to say, it didn't take long for the last of the Uchiha to fall unconscious. Once Sasuke was completely out for the count, Kageru unsummoned her snakes and they disappeared into smoke, leaving Sasuke to land unceremoniously upon the dirty ground.

"Pathetic." Kageru spat the words out on the fallen boy before turning around and walking away.

"Winner of the third match, Sasayaki Kageru. I now call for anyone interested in taking either Sasayaki Kageru or Uchiha Sasuke as an apprentice!" Kaga announced while deactivating the Kage no Kekai. Behind him, Koushiro and Yami were dragging the unconscious Sasuke to meet Seiko where she was able to force the poison out of his system and ensure he survive his fight. Kageru, on the other hand, seemed completely uninterested in what Kaga was saying. In fact, she simply continued on her stroll towards the participant's stands. After calling for interested parties three times in a row, Kaga announced that match three has been concluded. "Will Hyuuga Neji and Sakeyama Asahi, please make their way to the arena."

"I can't believe Sasuke lost so easily? (3)" Chouji muttered under his breath, still surprised at the shock lost. He was still under the impression that Sasuke was rookie of the year, and so, he should have performed much better than that. So far, out of the two Konoha Ninjas that had had their fights, both Hinata and Sasuke performed pretty badly, in Chouji's opinion. It wasn't because they weren't strong; it was because their opponent's were simply a lot stronger. As such, Chouji was starting to have serious self doubts about his own upcoming performance. And worse still, he was going to fight on match 14, the second last match. This just means more time to wait and fret, not something that would boost Chouji's confidence in the least.

"Relax. Sasuke simply bit off more than he could chew when he challenged that Sound Nin. Everyone could feel that she was on a completely different level to the rest of us, and yet, arrogant as he always is, Sasuke just had to challenge her anyway." Shikamaru slumped in tiredness. "He should expect that he wouldn't do very well against such a strong opponent. How troublesome..." Shikamaru concluded as he leaned backwards once more. "Don't worry about it Chouji, you'll do fine. At least you don't have a habit of underestimating your opponent like Sasuke."

"So she's the human clone? What a sad existence." Naruto commented quietly from his place sitting next to his aunt upon the VIP stands. Thinking back, he remembered a time when he was considered a 'non-human' as well. And then, there was Gaara. Even though they were jinchuriki; at the very least, they knew there were others of their kind. In her case, she literary was the only one in existence. Completely alone and alienated, she certainly lived a sad existence indeed (4).

"You wish to save her?" Ruri asked in a calm voice, eyes glazed and completely uninterested in the fights that were going on before her. It wasn't as if she didn't know the outcome of each and every fight. In fact, she knew exactly who would win and how weeks back. Simply put, she was not interested in going over the things she already knew. Her presence was nothing more than an obligation to the high councillors.

Ignoring his aunt's nonchalant attitude, Naruto looked down in slight shame. "I don't think I can... not unless she wishes to be saved in the first place. No, there's nothing we can do for her now." He concluded as he refocused his attention on the next match.

Down at the arena, Neji and Asahi stared at each other with the barely contained contempt and determination. "I'll crush you first, and then I'll crush your teammate for treating Hinata-sama the way he did." Neji growled through clenched teeth, still having not recovered from watching Hinata's match. He was feeling extremely resentful of Waisa Bado at the moment and as luck would have it, he himself was fighting against Bado's teammate, a fitting punishment indeed.

Instead of feeling intimidated, Asahi just shrugged in nonchalance. "Hey! I agree with you. Bado's ego needs to be taken down, badly. Just because I'm his team mate doesn't mean I enjoy watching his behaviour either. You're lucky you don't have to put up with him 24/7, think about how I feel!" The older boy retorted with a sarcastic

remark, ignoring the exclamation coming from Bado in the distant audience.

Neji blinked in surprise. "You... don't support your own teammate?" He asked in confusion.

Asahi grimaced at even the concept of supporting Bado. "We're teammates." He answered with deliberate slowness. "If he's in serious trouble – as in life or death situations – we might help him out. But other than that, no, we don't support his lone actions. You'll find that we Cloud Nins don't consider being in a team as important as individual improvement. Bado's just Bado. You either hate him or you loathe him, there's no middle ground." The blue haired boy answered succinctly, not at all fazed by the crudeness of his words.

"I see." Neji blinked once more as he digested the information. Well, this certainly threw off his original plan to beat the crap out of Asahi in order to make Bado angry and out for revenge. Hell, Neji had even been looking forward to releasing his own anger out on Asahi. But his fantasy was instantly shattered as he realised both Asahi and he were on the same boat, both wanting to beat the crap out of Bado but not having the opportunity to until at least tomorrow's challenge. Grinding his teeth in frustration, Neji snapped at Asahi rather prudishly, as if blaming the other boy for not siding with Bado – his own teammate. "Well then, it seems as if there's no point in battling my vengeance out on you, is there?"

Asahi shrugged once more. "I don't think so." And then, Asahi's expression changed, he became serious and determined once more (5). "However, that doesn't mean we can get out of this fight. I, for one, would like to fight against you, Hyuuga Neji. I want to see how much I've improved and how well I'll do against you Hyuugas myself. Let us put away our differences and fight as true Shinobis, as equals."

Neji nodded in return.

"Match Four. Sakeyama Asahi versus Hyuuga Neji. Hajime!" Kaga called out after all the speeches were done. Instantly, Neji activated his Byakugan and got into a typical Hyuuga stance for defence; Asahi pulled out the 6 foot reddish pole from the strap on his back and twirled it slightly before holding it out in a straight attack mode.

Without waiting for a signal, the two combatants rushed forwards at each other, intending to do the first damage. Neji thrust forward with an opened palm only to be intercepted by Asahi's long pole. In the split second the pole made contact with Neji's arm, a section on the tip of the pole slit open and out came a very sharp blade, turning the long pole into a spear in less than a second. Having the Byakugan activated, Neji was able to see the transformation and quickly retreated, barely avoiding the sharp end of the pole as Asahi rotated and thrust it forward.

Landing a safe distance away, Neji concentrated on the pole and saw that it had two blades attached to each end of the pole. Not only had that, but the pole itself segments into three sections, tied together with chains. The chains themselves were graphitised with sealing symbols as well as the interior walls of the pole itself. / *This was definitely not an ordinary weapon.* / Neji thought to himself.

After a moment's pause, the two ran towards one another once more, attacking and defending one another's moves using highly advanced Taijutsu manoeuvres as well as pole-twirling techniques. The crowds watched in fascination as none of Neji's close hand combat skills were ever able to reach Asahi due to the length of his pole. And each time Neji got close enough, Asahi would split the pole into segments and used each segment like a nunchaku for close hand combat. Even the chains that lengthen and shorten with Asahi's chakra control inhibited Neji's range of attacks. In fact, the chains were the most dangerous part of the weapon within Asahi's hand.

Asahi segmented his pole into its three parts, each end having its deadly blade exposed. Using chakra manipulation, Asahi twirled the three-part pole around and elongated the chain within each section.

The long chain enabled the bladed end of the pole to suddenly rush through the air like missiles, aimed solely at Neji. Had Neji not had his Byakugan activated, he wouldn't have been able to see the attack at all. Reacting on instinct, Neji jumped and rotated in defence. "Kaiten!" The sphere of chakra repelled the chain-linked spear like a ball on a flat surface. But instead of the weapon rebounding back and hitting Asahi in the face, he simply shortened the chain until the three segments reconnect into a pole, leaving himself unscathed by the repelled weapon.

Up in the audience stands, Tenten was glaring with envious thoughts.

"Uh... Tenten." Lee tried to distract his teammate as her eyes lit up with envy. "You... okay there?" He stuttered in question, feeling rather nervous about the suppressed rage and jealousy emitting from his team mate.

"That guy..." Tenten finally answered in a snappish tone. "His technique is better than mine... His weapon is better than mine... He's... He's..." Biting her tongue, Tenten finally spit it out. "He's a better weapons' master than I am." Her glaring eyes only intensified.

Lee gulped, having never seen Tenten react in such a negative manner. He knew that she was probably the only person in Konoha to have taken the path of mastering practically all weapons, but that doesn't mean she actually expects herself to beat a specialist master in their own weapon, right? Katana was a good example of a sword master, and his skills were far beyond that of Tenten. It's simply inconceivable that Tenten expects to beat every weapon's master in their own specialised weapons, right?

Lee wasn't sure and instead of asking out, he opted for the coward's way and remained silent. In deed, his self-preservation instincts are finally kicking in and he's definitely changing from the way he once was. Had he still lived his life behind Gai-sensei's shadow, he would have disregarded his inner voice and boisterously inquired about

Tenten's bad mood. Now, he had changed – only a little bit but he did change. Whether this was a good thing or bad thing, he still wasn't sure.

Returning back to the battle that was happening down at the arena, Neji had just performed a 'Hakke Kushou' which is the only long range attack in his arsenal and seem to actually affect Asahi. As the burst of chakra and air slammed into Asahi, he had no escape except to go with the flow, flying backwards and accidentally dropping his pole during the impact. Taking this golden opportunity presented to him, Neji rushed towards Asahi once the pole was far enough away from the boy and he was still disorientated from the blast of chakra.

Coming in close, Neji leaned down on his waist and twisted just a metre in front of Asahi. "Jyuuken Hou: Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou! (Gentle Fist Style: Divinity Sixty Four strike)"

"Two Strikes!"

"Four Strikes!"

"Eight Strikes!"

"Sixteen Strikes!"

"Thirty two strikes!"

"Sixty Four strikes!"

By the end of Neji's rushed barrage, Asahi was on the floor struggling to get back up to his feet. A few tense minutes passed as Asahi continued to try to stand but was unable to, and Neji simply stood, recovering his breath but did nothing to insult the incapacity or pride of his opponent. He had learnt a long time ago to never underestimate his opponent. If Asahi was able to stand back up on to his feet with sheer will alone, then Neji himself would concede defeat

as continuing to fight on would be meaningless. But in the end, Asahi collapsed back onto the ground in exhaustion, and Kaga finally concluded this match. "Winner, Hyuuga Neji!"

The crowd applauded and cheered once more, but Neji ignored all that. Instead, he walked to his opponent and stretched out his hand. Asahi paused for a moment before taking it into his own. Neji pulled his opponent up onto his feet and helped him move towards Koushiro and Hikari who were walking towards them. Katana arrived as well and took care of Asahi's staff. While Koushiro and Hikari catered Asahi away from the arena for healing, Neji remained stoic in his assessment of his performance. */ I was lucky. /* Neji mentally concluded. */ If Asahi had not lost his staff, I would have lost. /* He understood this with certainty. Behind him, he could hear Kaga calling out for interested parties in taking either Neji or Asahi as apprentices. But no one came forward.

Neji simply shrugged and walked back to the audience stands where his team mates sat.

Back on the arena, Kaga began the next stage of the matches. "Will Kawasaki Reiko and Gengakku Mogoto, please make their way to the arena."

Match five didn't last very long. Reiko started things off by verbally taunting Mogoto as the 'half-man, half-woman transvestite,' in which the Sound Nin did not reply. She then taunted Mogoto for his or her muteness and supposed blindness. Finally she pulled out her trusty knives for close hand combat. Suffice to say, less than four seconds later, Mogoto had unravelled the weapon strapped onto his or her person's back (much like what Kankuro would have done for his puppet weapons), which just so happen to be a stringed instrument, usually called a Gengakki. Mogoto squatted down on one leg, crossing his or her other leg across it before placing the instrument on top and then started playing on the strings. The strings of the instrument, enhanced by chakra, leapt out of its constraints and literary flew towards Reiko. In less than a second, Reiko had

dropped her knives; her body was entirely wrapped up by Mogoto's strings and was slowly being sliced to little pieces. If Kaga hadn't interrupted the fight and concluded it with Mogoto being declared the winner, Reiko might have actually died. In the end, neither combatant had performed well enough to interest any Kuunoki ninjas into taking them as apprentices.

"Will Sabaku no Temari and Harate Echiko please make their way down to the arena?" Kaga announced as Reiko's bleeding form was carried away by Akiko and Mishizu (since for some reason, none of the male Gate Guardians dared to get within 5 metres of Reiko) (6).

Temari stood confidently upon the battlefield, her giant metal fan still strapped tightly to her waist. Opposite her, the violet haired girl named Harate Echiko also stood confidently, if a little arrogant, with her arms crossed over her chest in a typical Gaara fashion. Both teenage girls looked strong, they looked confident. This match would definitely be one to excite and awe.

Ignoring the tense silence in the air, Kaga quickly began the match. "Match six, Sabaku no Temari versus Harate Echiko, Hajime!"

Echiko jumped backwards and started a long series of hand seals, while Temari stood confident, not even moving an inch. Echiko sneered at her opponent's nonchalance. "You'll wish you never underestimate me." She snapped before completing her seals. "Suiton! Suiryuu dan no jutsu (Water Element: Water Dragon Missile)" A surge of water suddenly ran into the arena, condensed from the air and ground, as well as from the remaining water vapour that had once frozen the floor from Gaara's previous fight. The water moulded and formed a giant dragon head. The dragon held its mouth open and suddenly shot forth five basketball size water bullets flying towards Temari at a rapid speed.

Temari jumped quickly and managed to dodge three of the giant water bullets before she was pulled out her fan and smashed its metallic form into the path of the bullets, splashing water everywhere as a

result. "Hmp. If you think that's enough to take me down, you're naïve, little girl!" Temari taunted back with full confidence.

Not wanting to waste time playing around, Temari opened her fan to fully to expose the three purple stars painted on it. "I don't have time to play, little girl. Let's get serious." She gave a final warning before flapping her giant fan from one side to the next, infusing her chakra into the techniques that was being performed. "Dai Kamaitachi no jutsu!"

Seeing the large mass of slashing winds coming towards her, Echiko instinctively performed a defensive jutsu. "Suiton! Suijin Heki no Jutsu (Water Element: Water Barrier no jutsu)" Though small in comparison to most water barriers, Echiko's weaker version of the technique was still enough to keep her safe from Temari's slashing winds.

Once the winds had calmed down some what, Echiko dispersed her water technique, just in time to see Temari jump in the air and preparing to smash her once-again closed fan right onto Echiko's head. Instinctively performing another quick set of seals, Echiko managed (in the last second) to create a misu bunshin some distance away from her current location and then kawarimi herself with her water clone. Temari's massive fan smashed into water clone and it instantly splattered into multitudes of water particles, wetting Temari, her fan as well as the ground beneath them.

Throwing several large kunai from her new location, Echiko watched in slight annoyance as Temari twisted her fan forwards just in time to block all of Echiko's weapons. The sounds of metal clinching against metal with sparks of static electricity flying at the impact gave the audience a great show to watch. Jumping backwards to give herself some breathing room, Temari couldn't help but smirk at her opponent. */ A wind user against a water user; definitely an interesting combination. I wonder who would win. /* For the first time in a long time, Temari really wanted to prove herself against a worthy opponent. She wanted to win, and she wanted to win badly.

Realising that long range attacks were probably her opponent's best moves, Echiko decided to put all her faith in her hand-on-hand combat abilities. But before that, Echiko wanted to give herself an even greater advantage. Performing another set of familiar seals, Echiko couldn't help but grin to herself. / *Yes, victory will be MINE! And victory will be SWEET!* / She thought to herself even while she whispered her techniques name quietly. "Kirigakure no Jutsu (Hidden Mist Technique)."

Once more, all the water molecules in the area condensed together again, but this time, they formed a thick mist in order to obscure Temari's eyes instead of attacking her outright. Opening her fan slightly in preparation to blast the mist away, Temari only heard a slight sound from the mist surrounding her before she reacted instinctively against an unseen threat. Lucky for Temari, she reacted just in time to block twin sai's that rained down on her suddenly from the cloudy mist. Realising that she was at a big disadvantage if she remained in the mist, Temari used all her strength in order to push Echiko back, before quickly pulling forth her fan out once more. Using a concentrated amount of chakra, Temari jumped onto her beloved fan and rose to the sky just in time to miss another barrage of close-hand attacks from Echiko's Sais.

Now up in the air, Temari soon realised she was still at the disadvantage as Echiko continued to through hundreds of heavy kunai at her flying form. In fact, she was a perfect sitting duck for Echiko's long range attacks now that she was out in the open. Not that it was much different from when she was trapped in the mist, but Temari was nothing but persistent. And she was determined to win, no matter what.

Back inside the mist, Echiko was growling in frustration. If it had been close-hand combat, Echiko would have won easily. But now she had to rely on her kunai and long distance attacks against Temari, which simply wasn't working. She was seriously contemplating using a full 'Suiryuu dan' against Temari once more in

order to end the match once and for all when Temari finally decided to make a move.

Flying high up in the air, Temari suddenly jumped off her fan but still gripped its ends in a powerful grip. Twisting the fan around while falling towards the ground, Temari called forth one of her most powerful attacks. "Fuuton: Tatsu no Oshigoto! (Wind Element, Severing Pressure)"

Temari's voice stilled as she finally dropped onto the mist covered ground. Within the mist, Echiko grinned triumphantly. "What the hell kind of move was that, nothing happened! And now, you're in my playing field, Suna Kunoichi!" Echiko taunted as she readied her Sai once more.

Temari smirked beneath her bangs. "That's what you think."

Because the two girls were fighting once more in the mist, they couldn't see what was happening outside the mist. Namely, they couldn't see how the sky had suddenly darkened with storm clouds covering the area. They couldn't see the sparks of lightly flash against the dark clouds. They couldn't see how the black clouds suddenly opened into clear sky as if they were right in the eye of a giant storm. They couldn't see, that is, until the roar of a tornado was formed. The wild and rapid winds of a tornado – formed from the centre of the eye of the storm, reached down towards the mist covered ground. Within seconds, the giant tornado tore the mist apart, revealing a completely shocked Echiko and a smirking Temari in its midst. The tornado was merciless as it swallowed the immobile Echiko from the ground and continued slashing at her body from within itself. Wind's nature is to cut. And Echiko found herself being sliced with small incisions, as if hundreds of tiny knives were flying around her. She soon lost consciousness as the winds finally died down, leaving her crumpled form upon the arena floor.

"Winner of the Sixth match, Sabaku no Temari!" The audience cheered loudly at the spectacular fight that had been the sixth match. It was certainly on par to the first match. It showcased the true power

of dedicated Kunoichis in the Ninja world; it showed that females are just as capable as their male counterparts. But most of all, it earned Temari of the Sand a surprising invite for apprenticeship with none other than the wind mistress of the Air village itself – Kazeha Akiko.

"Will Gojou Hikon and Sakeyama Saporu please make their way down to the arena?" Kaga called as Harate Echiko was carried off the arena with the help of some of the Gate Guardians, and Temari confidently walked towards her new master.

The two aforementioned girls made their way to the arena and were left to wait for the match to begin. They didn't have to wait long before Kaga announced the start of the match. "Match seven, Gojou Hikon versus Sakeyama Saporu, hajime!"

In contrast to the previous match, Hikon simply crouched in a defensive manoeuvre pulling out her trusty knives in front of her; while Saporu started searching through her ninja pouch before producing a scroll. Here, Saporu grinned maniacally at Hikon while she quickly opened the scroll with absolute glee.

Back up in the stands where a newly recovered Asahi sat, Saporu's half brother took one look at the word that was scribed onto the scroll (which just happens to be 'alcohol') and whimpered. Palming his face in order to hide his shame, Asahi couldn't help but groan. "Does she have to pull that out right at the beginning!? This is gonna get so embarrassing..." He whimpered again, but no body noticed since all their attentions were focussed on the fight happening in the arena.

Opening the scroll, Saporu summoned forth the item that was inside. The smoke cleared to reveal a large jug filled to the brim with what seemed to be alcohol (since there was the large character of 'alcohol' written upon the jug). "Ah! Nothing like a little Sake to brighten up my day." She cheered with enthusiasm before chugging the jug of alcohol straight down her throat, completely oblivious to

the large number of people watching her (including her opponent) with animated sweat-drops upon their foreheads.

Saporo spent several long seconds drowning herself in her beloved alcohol before finally, the jug became empty. Saporo slumped in an inebriated manner while she gave a heart felt sigh of pleasure. "Ah! That hit rock bottom alright!" She sang in a sing-song manner before she suddenly hiccupped. "Oooh! That feels so good." Swaying on her feet, Saporo's face was very red with heat, and her eyes were unable to focus on anything with any accuracy.

Hikon, watching all this in silence finally decided to speak in her cold tone of voice. "You're drunk." She said pointedly.

"Well! Aren't you a little Miss Smart-ass!" Saporo yelled out in a childish manner, pouting and crunching her face up in irritation. Tripping over her own feet, Saporo struggled to straighten herself in a swaying manner. "Shho, are ya gonna fight or not!? If not, I'mmm gonna go shhleeeep!" Her words started slurring, completely eradicating the supposed threat within her words.

"This... should be easy." Hikon concluded as she suddenly launched herself towards her opponent, knives up front and ready to slash. At the last second, Saporo performed an incomplete twist (avoiding Hikon and her knives) before once again tripping on her feet, flipping backwards onto her hands, Saporo managed to kick Hikon right in the face when her feet were twisted in an upward direction, smashing Hikon some distance away.

Up in the stands, Tenten could not believe what she was seeing. "Oh god no! Not another Suiken (Drunken Fist) user!?" Even Tenten started to whimper at the implications.

Sitting beside her, Lee frowned. "What's a Suiken user, Tenten? Have you seen one before? They look very strong, I wonder how strong they are compared to us? What do you think, Tenten?"

Tenten ignored Lee's questions and only whimpered some more, tears visibly streaming down her face in agony at the irony of the situation.

Staggering to her feet, Hikon glared towards the rolling figure of Saporo, seemingly having fun turning and twisting one way on the ground before changing her mind and twisted towards another direction. / *Was it just a fluke?* / Hikon asked herself mentally before remembering that she was currently in a fight and that she must concentrate fully on the fight itself. Not taking a chance this time, Hikon re-strapped her knives away before quickly performing a series of hand seals. Once she had completed her hand seals, Hikon whispered her attack: "Yuki no Hitohira no mai (Dance of snow flakes)." In that instant, Hikon's body dissolved into tiny pieces of snow drifting off into the wind.

Saporo frowned as her opponent seemingly disappeared from sight; she dragged herself back onto her feet, still swaying to either side as she did so. Seemingly for no reason what so ever, Saporo suddenly ducked under an invisible swing, rolled forward on the ground like a pretend-ball, before jumping and performing a split in mid air. Surprisingly, a soft "Omph" could be heard when Saporo's feet impacted against something not visible. By now, the audience have realised that Hikon had used a Genjutsu to hide her presence while still continuing to attack Saporo.

During this time, Hikon's presence was once again erased while a new Genjutsu came into affect. "Kosetsu no Fubuki (Snow fall blizzard)." A powerful blizzard suddenly formed from out of no where, chilling the temperature in the air. All the audience were shivering due to the sudden drop in heat while Saporo seemed unaffected by the whole thing – probably due to the fact that she's still drunk. Within the blizzard covered arena, streams of ice shuriken started flying around Saporo, cutting her body whenever they came into contact.

Saporo seemed unaffected by the seemingly numerous cuts and injuries that suddenly appeared on her body, her gaze was completely focussed on the blizzard covered sky. "So pretty..." She muttered as a new slice appeared upon her cheek and blood quickly started dribbling down her face in a flow of red. "Too pretty... to white." Saporo, having somewhat come to her senses, staggered forward in a slightly swaying manner. Rubbing her head in irritation, Saporo muttered under her breath. "Shit. A headache's starting. My hangover is gonna hit me like a freight train." Lifting her hands away, Saporo gazed attentively at the blood that now adorned her palm. "I'm bleeding?" She asked in a strangely calm manner before finally realising what she had said. "I'm bleeding!" She cried in outrage (7).

Somehow finding the mental capacity to concentrate, Saporo used the blood that now stained her palms and quickly performed a set of hand seals, miraculously inserting the right amount of chakra into the jutsu. Slamming her palm upon the snow covered ground, Saporo called out in effort. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" The smoke cleared to reveal a small 1-year-old kitten, looking completely harmless if not for the black leather vest covering the front half of the kitten with what seems to be a large number of kunai, shuriken and other assorted weapons attached to the vest. The shorthaired, Russian Blue cat had ice blue eyes and a forehead protector strapped around its neck with the symbol for the Hidden Cloud Village carved into it.

"Bodka! Search and electrocute!" Saporo ordered as the little kitten ran into the mist of snow. A few seconds later, a silent flash of light blinded most of the audience. A few seconds after that, the snow blizzard illusion and mist slowly disappeared, revealing a collapsed Hikon upon the edge of the arena. Beside her sat a completely unperturbed kitten, relaxingly licking herself for a job well done. Saporo gave the little kitten a big smile and patted it on the head. "Good work, Bodka, now return." The kitten dispersed into a cloud of smoke.

Seeing that match is over, Kaga decided to declare it properly. "Winner! Sakeyama Saporo!" The audience cheered, Saporo herself

jumped and cheered before slumping back down onto the ground clutching her head in pain. "Ow... hangover..." She muttered as she was dragged away rather forcefully by her own brother (who had rushed forward to grab her before she could do anything else to embarrass him). Hikon too had been taken to be treated by some of the Gate Guardians. Kaga then called for anyone interested in taking either Hikon or Saporu as apprentices but none replied. And so, he continued with the rest of the matches.

Surprisingly, the next match's combatants were already out on the arena, without need for him to call for them. Shrugging off the enthusiasm upon the faces of the two fighters, Kaga simply gave them what they wanted, an excuse to fight. "Match eight. Inuzuka Kiba versus Asagiri Kaori. Hajime!"

"Let's show 'em what we've got, boy!" Kiba yelled in enthusiasm while flipping a soldier pill into Akamaru's mouth at the same time. He wasn't going to take any chances this time, especially not during his once in a lifetime chance of becoming an apprentice. Akamaru barked in agreement, having consumed the red soldier pill, its fur soon turned a wild red in colour. Jumping upon his master's back in a crouched position, Kiba quickly performed one of his favourite Jutsu. "Juujuin bunshin! Gatsuuga!" Kiba and the other Kiba clone (Akamaru) launched themselves towards their opponent with no hassle or fanfare.

Kaori merely glanced at them with a determined outlook on her face. Standing firmly upon the ground, she started performing her own seals as the two Kiba's approached her. "Dorokui (Mud Spike)!" Stomping her left foot as she finished her seals, a chain of earthen spikes erupted from in front of her legs and shot towards the two Kibas.

The two Kibas, having seen the approaching earth spikes, abruptly split apart their joint charges and moved towards different directions – one Kiba attacking from the left and the other Kiba from the right.

Kaori narrowed her eyes in irritation. "I didn't think I'd have to use it already in my first match, but no matter." She muttered under her breath. Closing her eyes in concentration, she focussed firmly on splitting her chakra manipulation into two streams. "Jutsu Blitzkrieg!" (8) Silent with shock, the audience of the entire stadium watched in awe as Kaori's strange black and white hair started moving on its own as if it was a living entity in its own right. Kaori's hands continued to form another set of seals while behind her head, her strange hair parted and formed what looked like replicas of her own hands, and these two started performing seals as well.

"Kazedan (Air Shot)! Mizudan (Aqua Bolts!)" Kaori verbally spoke as two attacks were simultaneously performed by her, to the surprise of everyone. Never in history has anyone heard that someone could perform two attacks at the same time. Most of the time, people assumed that Jounins became so fast in their hand sealing that it 'looks' like they performed two techniques simultaneously when in fact, it was one attack after another. Never had they seen someone who's actually capable of performing 2 Ninjutsu simultaneously, resulting in this becoming an awe inspiring moment.

Several invisible bubbles of compressed air shoots towards the Kiba on Kaori's left, blasting against Kiba's drill like stance, and though the attack did little else except sting Kiba slightly, it did manage to swerve Kiba's rotation direction away from Kaori's stagnant position. On the right side of Kaori, some thin but powerful streams of water shot towards the other Kiba, not only rendering him wet but also disrupting his rotational motion, resulting in him slipping from his feet and sliding slightly away from Kaori.

At the same time as this was happening Kaori had completed a second set of seals – one set with her physical hands, and another set by her hair-replicated hands. "Hikidan! (Small Fireball)! Raitsuikanban! (Lightning disc)!" To her right, the soaked Kiba was suddenly struck down by an electrical disc created by Kaori's physical hands as she completed her Jutsu. The electrical charge held within the disc surged through out the wet Kiba's body,

electrocuting and shocking all of his nervous system. A tense few seconds later, the once wet and electrocuted Kiba burst into smoke, revealing an unconscious Akamaru in his stead.

On the other side, the real Kiba had been hit with a small fireball. And though he was slightly burnt, he did manage to escape without much injury. Having watched Akamaru's fall, Kiba glared hotly at the girl before him. Without Akamaru, he couldn't do any of his major attacks – namely, the Soutourou and Garouga. Without Akamaru, Kiba's strength is in affect cut down to less than half his potential. Growling under his breath, Kiba decided to risk it all in one strike and hope for the best. He was never the type to think things through properly anyway and not to mention he was incapable of being calm when his doggy companion was hurt before his eyes. "You'll get it now, you Bxxxh!"

Frowning angrily at the name calling, Kaori straightened up from her slightly defensive stance, having not moved an inch since she first entered the arena. "I'd like to see you try, you mangy mutt!" She shouted back just as heatedly.

With those words, Kiba performed another 'Gatsuuga', this time with the intent of piercing straight through the girl's very body. Kaori held her stance, unafraid and unaffected by Kiba's charge. In the last possible second before Kiba's spinning form impact against Kaori's unmoving body, her hair suddenly grew exponentially in length and wrapped around Kiba's body like millions of tiny twine.

Even though Kiba desperately tried to escape by continuing the spin of the Gatsuuga, he only managed to further entangle himself with Kaori's strangely animated black and white hair. Only a few seconds later, Kiba was completely trapped by the dynamic hair strands. "This is it for you. Give up before I strangle you to death." Kaori warned as she tightened her hair's grip on the growling boy.

Kiba, however, had too much pride to concede defeat and in the end, he was lucky to escape due to Kaga's intervention. Kaga had pronounced Asagiri Kaori the winner of match eight and left it at that.

Kiba, though bruised and slightly singed was able to walk away on his own two feet, carrying the still unconscious Akamaru within his arms. Although Kaori had won the match impressively, she had not impressed any of the Kuunoki members enough to invite her into an apprenticeship, and so ends match eight.

The next match was a whirlwind of activity, held between Grass's Midou Kei and Stone's Iwama Uzuru. Suffice to say, the match ended in a double knockout between Kei's weapon techniques and Uzuru's strange summons (9).

"Match ten, Tenten versus Kapasu Juro! Hajime!" Not wanting to waste time, Kaga launched straight into the next match.

Two minutes into Tenten's fight and she realised that she was fighting a very weak opponent. From the start of the match to now, her opponent had done nothing but hide in the mist he had created some time ago. And although Tenten couldn't see her opponent, she is able to perform a wide range attack in order to strike anything on the ground, be it inside or outside of the small cloud of mist created by the Mist Shinobi. This particular kid's mist was nothing compared to Echiko's previous version. It was smaller in range as well as thinner in density. As such, Tenten was having a very easy time at the moment.

Suffice to say, Tenten was severely disappointed in her opponent. "Oi! Oi! Is this all you can do? Run and hide behind a cloud of mist? For gods' sake, attack! Strike at me! Throw a bloody kunai or shuriken, just DO SOMETHING!" She screeched in pent up irritation, a completely unnatural action on her part. However, if you consider her situation at the moment, some could sympathise with the girl. Here she was, standing atop the ancient stadium of the Hidden Village in the air, all pumped and ready to show her abilities and potential, and she got a weak opponent that couldn't challenge her enough to show off what she's got. Man, life sucks.

"Come on!!!!!! Do something!! Didn't you have that fxxking sword strapped onto your back! Use it for god's sake! Just... ATTACK ME!!!" Tenten called out once more, hoping desperately that something would happen eventually.

As if finally reacting to Tenten's harsh words, the mist slowly dissipated, leaving behind a squatted figure of Kapasu Juro. Upon his body was multiple scratches and scrapes, a display of how he barely managed to avoid most of Tenten's sharp weapon summons that littered the arena floor. Looking at the Konoha ninja with an almost forlorn expression upon his pale face, Juro muttered in a soft but nervous voice. "I give up. I don't want to fight." And so ends a very anticlimactic match.

Tenten was so frustrated that she wanted to scream out her fury to the rest of the world while her supposed opponent only hobbled back towards his strangely sympathetic team mates, nervously avoiding all the weapons upon the ground. As expected, neither Tenten nor Juro performed impressive enough to warrant an apprenticeship invite.

"That was pathetic." A newly healed and awakened Sasuke sneered. "He didn't even put up any fight at all. It's like fighting Shikamaru, only worse because this kid put almost no effort whatsoever." He continued to comment half-heartedly.

Sitting in front of the last Uchiha heir, Shikamaru's eyebrow twitched at the comparison, but he suppressed any urge to retort back. Doing anything at all would be too troublesome in his perspective.

"Poor Tenten, to have picked such a useless opponent..." Sakura spoke up sympathetically as she watched how Lee and Neji tried to comfort the irritated girl. "But I wonder... why did Tenten pick the kid in the first place anyway?"

"It's because of the sword on his back." Daiku, the usually cheerful member of team snow, answered. "That long and thin sword is a

special sword, one belonging to a member of the 7 Swordsman of the Mist, in fact. She probably thought that a kid carrying around the legendary sword would be quite the weapon's master. I guess she thought wrong." Daiku couldn't help but rub his chin in analysis.

"What if the boy was just keeping his trump card ability a secret? What if he's actually really strong and just hiding it?" Chouji commented from the side, wondering whether there was a large conspiracy at hand.

"Ie (No). You can tell from his musculature that he doesn't train much. His hands were smooth and clean, meaning that they have never undergone heavy practice with a sword's hilt before. If he had, then he would at least get some calluses, splinters or burns. Nah, this kid really is weak and probably not suited to become a Ninja at all. If Tenten had noticed any of those signs instead of concentrating on his sword only, she would have known she picked a pathetic fighter." Shikamaru finally commented, ending the argument at hand.

"Next match, Jikizuka Tsubame versus Yamanaka Ino. Hajime!"

Ino instantly drew out her trusty sword and ran straight towards her opponent. She wanted to test out the Stone Nin's abilities first before getting serious. That was a fatal mistake on Ino's part.

Tsubame smirked slightly as she watched the Yamanaka charge at her with nothing but a sword. Once Ino was within 25 feet of Tsubame's stationary form, Tsubame spoke out in confidence: "Is that all you can do? That sword isn't even that great, barely above average is how I see it. You should really consider getting a better sword. But then again, any sword - as long as it's made out of metallic substances are useless against me." With a flick of her hands in mid air, Ino suddenly found her own sword twirling out of her grip, literary dancing in the air as if held by some invisible force. "Let us end this little charade shall we?" Tsubame cheerfully replied while she twisted her fingers once more, and Ino found her sword's

sharp edge suddenly gliding mere millimetres away from her delicate throat.

Finding herself stuck in such a dangerous situation, Ino remained relatively calm. "It seems I underestimated you, it won't happen again." The purple clad girl commented when her body suddenly dissolved into water.

Up in the stands, Sakura's eyes widened comically. "When the hell did *INO* learn the Mizu Bunshin?" She cried in shock.

Chouji shrugged in nonchalance, he didn't seem surprised by his team mate's sudden knowledge of the jutsu. "Ino's been training hard with Haku-sempai whenever they have any free time, and Haku-sempai has been teaching her some basic water techniques. The mizu bunshin is but one of those techniques."

The real Ino revealed herself by bursting through the ground beneath Tsubame. The older girl barely managed to jump back and out of way from Ino's kunai. Not stopping in her assault, Ino quickly wrapped an explosion note to said kunai before throwing it towards Tsubame once again.

Tsubame held her arms together in a cross and mentally concentrated on her bloodline limit ability to control the movements of metal. The kunai (with the explosion tag attached) suddenly stopped around 3 metres away from Tsubame's form. However, this did nothing towards the still attached explosion tag, which chose that particular moment to explode, resulting in a large amount of smoke but very little else.

Once the smoke and dust had cleared, both Tsubame and Ino were found standing on opposite sides of the arena. Tsubame gave Ino a determined and yet happy smile. "Looks like you're got some spunk after all. You go, girl! Now let's get serious." She opened up her

weapons pouch and pulled out several round metallic balls in her hand.

Ino, not taking any chances, launched several kunai and shuriken arching their way towards Tsubame. "Didn't you hear a thing I said before, metallic objects are useless against me! My bloodline limit allows me to control them with my mind!" Holding out a hand, Tsubame mentally commanded the flying metallic objects to stop and instantly they did.

/ SHIT! / Ino thought to herself as she focussed her chakra. "Nanoga! (Elongate)" Having gone and retrieved her sword, she concentrated her own chakra and made it surge through the metal form of her sword, lengthening the blade to three or four times its original length. Slamming the long blade back onto the ground, Tsubame barely dodged the massively long blade, having jumped up and away just in the nick of time.

"Is metallic weapons the only thing you can use?" Tsubame taunted even while Ino's mind whirled in activity, trying to find a counter to Tsubame's bloodline ability.

/ Damn. Kunai, my sword, shuriken and probably Senbon are useless against this girl. She can control any metal things! If that's the case, then I can only rely on Ninjutsu or Genjutsu as my Kenjutsu doesn't work and I suck at Taijutsu. Damn! Now I wish I had learnt more Ninjutsu or maybe a few Genjutsu! I don't really have anything else up my sleeve except my Shintenshin and that technique requires my opponent to be held still while I'm performing it! I am so screwed. / Ino's face remained calm and serene even though mentally, she was chastising herself for not putting in more effort in regard to other modes of fighting.

"If you're done, then it's my turn." Tsubame called as she threw the small metal balls into the air, where they instantly shifted in form and shape, transforming themselves into a large shuriken flying directly towards Ino.

Performing some artistic jumping, twisting and other acrobatic manoeuvres, Ino was able to avoid the various shuriken coming her way, having past experience with chakra enhanced kunai and shuriken helped a lot, she thought. However, when several of the large shuriken merged and formed a spinning wheel with spikes on its edge, Ino could feel the fear and tension pressing in on her.

While Ino placed most of her focus on dodging the insane wheel of death (Ino dubbed it herself), she did not notice how Tsubame had transformed the rest of her metallic balls into tiny metal wires, almost invisible to the eye. Soon, the trap was set and Ino suddenly found herself entangled by tiny metal wires that literary wrapped around her, with its origins from the centre of the floating metallic balls in the air. Watching in fear as the still spinning 'wheel of death' fly closer and closer towards her trapped form, Ino couldn't help but shut her eyes tightly and called out at the top of her lungs. "I give up!"

"Winner of match eleven, Jikizuka Tsubame!" Kaga announced while Tsubame patiently remoulded all her metal balls back into their original shape and returned them back into her pouch. Ino, having suffered very minor injuries, didn't even need to seek any medical help and just walked back under her own power towards the stands, severely disappointed in her own performance. Neither Tsubame nor Ino were offered an apprenticeship at the end of their match.

"Match twelve, Sabaku no Kankuro versus Aburame Shino. Hajime!" Kaga announced and the match immediately began.

Kankuro released one of the puppets strapped onto his back revealing it as his favoured Karasu puppet (Crow puppet). The newly unwrapped Karasu puppet (Crow puppet) rushed towards Shino, both its wrists snapping open to reveal a long and deadly blade coated with poison. Shino stood completely still and relaxed, his hands remained within his pockets as he waited for Kankuro's puppet to get closer. In seconds, Karasu slammed into Shino's unmoving form, piercing Shino with its deadly double blade, and Shino slumped forward as a result.

Some distance away, Kankuro snorted in disappointment. "Well, that was easy." Just as those words left his mouth, Shino's supposedly dead body suddenly disintegrated into a hive of bugs that swarmed around the two beings. In an instant, the swarm of insects swallowed the Karasu puppet whole and started consuming any collection of chakra within as well as clogging up the joints as they went along. "SHXT!" Kankuro shouted out in alarm as the chakra eating bugs quickly followed his chakra strings from the Karasu puppet towards Kankuro's own fingers.

Dropping the chakra strings that controlled his puppet, Kankuro jumped backwards, as far away as he could from the still swarming mass of insects. However, upon landing some distance away, Kankuro suddenly felt a presence behind him. "You should always hold on to your trump card until the end." Shino's monotone voice stated from behind Kankuro. As if sensing his assault, Kankuro instinctively ducked under Shino's forwards punch, pulling kunai out of his own large sleeves, the black clad boy pivoted on one foot, twisting his body around and slammed the poisoned kunai into Shino's coat covered chest. Again, the form of Shino dissolved into a mass of insects and Kankuro had no choice but to retreat in order to preserve his life.

Looking back at Karasu, Kankuro confirmed that most of the puppet has been infested with Shino's kikaichu bugs, but not all. Connecting onto the unmoving puppet with his chakra strings once more, he detached Karasu's head as well as two of its limbs from the main body. At the same time, Kankuro suddenly noticed movement from beneath him. Sliding backwards as fast as he could (with his focus shared between the oncoming danger and trying to keep his usable weapon at hand), Kankuro wasn't fast enough to dodge Shino's punch as he suddenly erupted from the ground. Latching onto Kankuro's form once more with a grip around his neck, Shino was surprised when Kankuro's face suddenly fractured into sand.

The bandaged form behind Kankuro quickly unwrapped, revealing itself to be the real Kankuro, while the form of Kankuro that was

being held by Shino quickly crumbled to reveal a strange horse shaped head with horns. "Meet my new puppet, Kuroari! Eurasuri Engeki: Kuro Higikki Ippatsu! (Puppet Theatre, Black Secret Technique First Strike)" Kankuro muttered beneath his breath, as the body of the newly revealed Kuroari opened to show a large empty space within the body. Kuroari's long arms suddenly moved forward to wrap around Shino's trapped form, before pulling the immobile boy into itself and locking its compartments shut.

Unfortunately for Kankuro, he couldn't use Karasu's entire arsenal of weapons, as bugs still clogged most of the main body. However, he was able to pull forth the two limbs and the head of Karasu he had freed earlier. The mechanical puppet limbs all opened to show sharp, poisonous blades that were embedded inside. The blades from the two limbs and head were quickly thrust into three of Kuroari's openings, hoping to pierce and poison Shino as they went along.

Kankuro smirked grimly, thinking he had won this round. That's is, until kikaichu bugs suddenly started crawling out of the rest of the wholes on Kuorai's body. Jumping backwards twice to avoid the bugs, Kankuro could only watch in fascination as the large numbers of insects continued to crawl out of his puppet. In fact, there were so many insects, that they started to force open Kuroari stomach opening, in order to free the once trapped Shino. */ Shxt! This can't be happening. I know I pierced him with the poison blades, how is he still bloody moving!?* / Kankuro thought in a panicky motion. Now, both of his puppets were completely infested with Shino's insects, and he simply did not have any other weapons on hand.

Slowly but surely, Shino managed to force open Kuroari's body and stepped out into the sun once more, if only bruised and slightly bleeding. He could feel the poison flooding his system from the three small cuts on his body – the same areas that Kankuro's poisonous blades managed to pierce him. However, he was also very lucky that Kankuro could only control three blades in this instant. Any more than that, and Shino may well be severely incapacitated.

At this very moment however, Shino was a little too angry too care how injured he really was. All he wanted was to beat Kankuro and win this round, no matter what the cost. As such, Shino somehow found the strength to call forth the rest of his kikaichu army and swarm over towards Kankuro in one last assault.

Kankuro had tried to run away, had tried to find a way to hide from Shino's unending bugs, but to no avail. In a few seconds, he was found and trapped; and with no weapons on hand, he was practically defenceless. As such, it was no wonder that he was engulfed in insects before he could even scream out his surrender. On the opposite side of the arena, Shino wasn't in much better shape. He was breathing harshly as the poison coursed through his body. He too, eventually dropped down onto his hands and knees, eyes closing in pain and ignorance to the rest of the world.

Looking at the two now unconscious combatants, Kaga declared this match a draw. The Gate Guardians quickly rushed in to cart both a chakra exhausted Kankuro and a severely poisoned Shino to Seiko for healing. Maya too was called in to try and curb Shino's wandering Kikaichu bugs to follow her out of the arena. It took a few minutes but the arena was soon cleared of any remaining bugs and poisonous residue. Unfortunately for both Shino and Kankuro, their performance on the field did not result in any invite for apprenticeship.

A few more minutes passed before Kaga finally deemed it time for the next match. "Match thirteen, Rock Lee versus Naja Daiku. Hajime!"

"I'll be taking this fight seriously, Daiku-san. I hope you don't mind." Lee asked chivalrously as he took off both of his ankle weights and placed them delicately on the floor.

Daiku grinned back and nodded. "I've heard from your friends that you can only fight with Taijutsu. If that's the case, why don't we agree to a Taijutsu-only match, what do you say, Lee-san?"

Lee's eyes sparkled with glee. "That would be MOST AWESOME! Your flames of youth are truly spectacular! Thanks but don't hold back, since I definitely won't!"

Daiku's grin became a determined smirk. "I won't. That I promise."

Without further ado, the two boys suddenly rushed at each other. Lee jumping and performing a spinning kick when he's finally in range. "Konoha Senpuu!" Daiku dodged the kick, twisting his body by the hips and lifting his left leg up as he went along, he somehow managed to perform an up-side-down axe kick towards Lee, who managed (in the last second) to twist out of the way.

Turning once more, Daiku thrust forward a punch towards Lee's face, but was blocked by Lee's cross arms instead. Jumping backwards once more, Lee looked down at his arms in confusion when he suddenly felt a biting chill run down his arms with aching pain.

Noticing Lee's confusion, Daiku decided to explain. "The Naja family were considered the first and original clan of the Hidden Snow village. We have always had an affinity with ice and snow techniques. And though it is not considered a bloodline ability, it was our family's most secret art. Our core ability is the unique power to manipulate temperature and ice. We even developed our own Taijutsu style and incorporated it with the ability to manipulate temperature – namely, whatever I touch, I can freeze. Whenever I punch you, I can freeze your body parts upon contact. And if I inflict enough damage, you will suffer a chilling frost bite. This unique Taijutsu style of the Naja clan is known as the Hyoken (Ice Fist)."

Smiling with renewed enthusiasm, Lee rushed forward once more at an incredible speed towards Daiku. "Konoha Dai Senpuu!" Lee kicked once, watching calmly as Daiku lifted his right arm to block the assault, before rotating and launching a second kick with his other foot. Caught off guard by the second kick, Daiku was hit with the force of Lee's full power, before being launched into the air and tumbling some distance away.

Not giving his opponent any breathing room, Lee landed and immediately rushed towards Daiku's position. Slightly disorientated but still able to see, Daiku reacted instinctively as he rolled away when Lee landed a kick where his head once was. Flipping up into a handstand, Daiku launched himself upward when Lee tried a sweeping kick towards his head once more. Now in mid air, Daiku somehow managed to twist sideways, launching a punch towards Lee once more, only to land on the green clad boy's shoulder instead of the intended target of Lee's face. Pushing off from the impact, Daiku somersaulted sideways before landing gracefully onto his feet once more in a ready stance.

Rubbing at his stinging shoulder, Lee could not help but compare Daiku's style with his usual training partners – namely Neji's Jyuuken. The two styles were very different in practice and yet the end result of stinging muscles and pain were rather similar. Neji uses Jyuuken to attack the chakra points and organs within a body, while Daiku's Hyoken simply freezes any skin, ligament, muscle or veins around the point of contact. And when you're heavily exercising said muscle, when the muscle suddenly freezes, it hurts like a large bite has been taken out of the muscle area.

Glancing upon his opponent's features, Lee suddenly felt curious about a certain matter that had come into mind. "Hey, Daiku-san... May I ask? How come you can react so much faster to my attacks when you're obviously not as fast as me?"

Daiku grinned in response. "When you a speed freak teammate like Hikon on your team, you learn to dodge and block real quick. Most of my defensive moves are instinctual by nature anyway, due to past experiences fighting Hikon."

Rising to his feet once more, Lee uncoiled the bandages around his arms (10). "I see. As promised, I will not hold back." Suddenly, Lee disappeared and reappeared directly underneath Daiku. "Omote Renge! (Initial Lotus)" Lee's soled feet slammed harshly onto Daiku's chin launching the Snow Nin high up into the air. Lee followed shortly after.

When Daiku finally opened his eyes to see what was going on, he was already wrapped up with bandages by Lee, and the two were already starting to spin as they came down from their present state high up in the air. Widening his eyes in fear, Daiku instantly called forth as much chakra as he could to produce some sort of defence. In response to Daiku's summoning, ice particles quickly formed around both Daiku and Lee, encasing the two boys as they came down from their plunge. Due to the ice that was entrapping both bodies, Lee was unable to disengage the Lotus and leave Daiku's side. As such, both boys literary plummeted straight down to earth and slammed against the soil beneath them.

Many members of the crowd were up on their feet in shock and astonishment as the giant cloud of dust that erupted where Lee and Daiku impacted against the ground. Everyone was holding their breath and hoping against hope that the two were still okay.

Slowly, the dust cloud cleared to reveal a strange ice sculpture right in the middle of the arena. It was not unlike what Samure had originally summoned with his sealing technique, but the purpose of this ice sculpture was not to entrap someone within, it was more acting like a cushion for the two bodies that laid upon the multitude of shattered ice.

Mournfully, Daiku blinked at the sky above him. "Ow." He muttered as his aching muscles answered in calling. Slowly crawling to his knees and staggering up onto shaking legs, Daiku looked around at the devastation his last second ice technique had caused. "Note to self, ice does NOT make a good cushion." He winched as a crick behind his neck made itself known. A pain-filled groan from beside him caught Daiku's undivided attention. Turning, he looked upon a slightly bloodstained Lee (he had a gash upon his right temple from a sharp ice shard) leaning precariously over one of the larger ice stones that was suppose to break their fall, but seemed to have caused just as much damage as having plunging straight to the hard ground in the first place.

Swaying as he walked, Daiku slowly made his way towards the disoriented Lee. Placing the tips of his fingers upon Lee's neck and spine, he spoke in a calm but tired voice. "Lee-san, I have my fingers right over your spinal cord. If I activate the Hyoken this close to your nerves, you may never walk again. Please concede this fight so we may end it as soon as possible and leave with our bodies intact."

Thinking the words over in his head, Lee finally decided to give in. "Okay, I surrender." Frowning both in pain and in disappointment, Lee finally realised that he truly had changed a lot. Had it been his old self, he would have gone to the very end to win this match, even at the cost of his life or body. Hell, he almost died in his match against Gaara and had almost suffered to the point of not being able to continue his life as a ninja. During this match, he had realised that now is not the time for him to sacrifice his life or livelihood for a win. If he were protecting someone precious to him, then yes, he would willingly die. If he were forced to prove his Nindou, then yes, he would willingly die. However, this first match was not yet the time. He still had tomorrow's matches to make a good impression. And even if he didn't receive an invite to apprenticeship, he would still train hard to become stronger. He realised, there isn't just ONE way forward; there are many varied ways, and he DOES have the opportunity to CHOOSE one over another.

With this enlightenment in mind, Lee was too focussed on his own thoughts to notice that he was being catered off to see a medic. Hell he didn't even notice when Kaga declared the exhausted Daiku the winner of match thirteen; nor did he noticed that no one in the audience spoke up with interest on taking either himself or Daiku as an apprentice. Soon, he was just too tired to care and drifted off into a nice nap.

"Match fourteen, Rensa Ahiru versus Akimichi Chouji. Hajime!" Kaga announced once both boys were dragged away from the arena, and that the ice debris disappeared with the disappearance of Kage no Kekai (Shadow Barrier).

Punching her hands together, Ahiru gave a loud cry. "Let's ROCK!" She followed the exclamation with slamming her fist into the ground. In response to her call, the earth beneath the arena suddenly ruptured into various sized boulders (11), and a giant spike erupted from the rubble intending to pierce straight through Chouji had the chubby boy not slipped on his own feet and fell onto his butt, narrowly missing the earth spike towards his heart.

"Hmp. I missed." Ahiru muttered under her breath, before slamming her other hand into the rubble. With a loud and concentrated cry, she pulled from the ground a giant slab of earth and rock. "See if you can dodge this! Doton! Doryuu Dango! (Earth Element: Mud Cannon ball)"

Chouji had no choice in the matter this time. Quickly performing his multi-size technique (Baika no Jutsu), he started rotating upon his own both. "Nikudan Sensha! (Human Cannon Ball)" The rotation and speed of the spin managed to drill its way through the large slab of earth being directed at him, eventually resulting in Chouji standing up an even larger pile of rubble than before.

Once out of his spin, Chouji looked around for his rather scary opponent, only to find that she was no longer standing where she once stood. Frowning in confusion, Chouji didn't have to wait long before his opponent revealed herself. "Shou Geki Ru! (Impact Rising Kick) (12)" Chouji looked up just in time to see Ahiru's spinning (horizontal spinning) form quickly making its way towards his location. Chouji barely managed to scramble out of the way when Ahiru twin legs slammed into the ground, creating a massive crater in place of all the rubble that had once surrounded the area.

Thinking now would be a good time to go on the offensive, Chouji pulled out some metal wires with kunai attached all over his body before performing another set of Baika no Jutsu. "Nikudan Hari Sensha! (Spiked Human Cannon Ball)" The now spiked Chouji rapidly rolled forward towards Ahiru's figure, slowly climbing out of the crater she had recently created.

Upon seeing the spiked thing coming her way, Ahiru acted with instinct. Slamming both palms onto the ground once more, she physically pulled up another large slab of earth, this time, the earth came up in a nice and straight square shape. "Doton Doroku Gaeshi (Earth Element: Mud Shield!)"

Unfortunately for Ahiru, Chouji easily ploughed through her defence and hand she not jumped back in time, she may have been run over by Chouji's spiked form by now. "Hmm... This is getting interesting." Ahiru smiled in excitement as she unwrapped some of the metal chains surrounding her arms and hips. */ Let's ROCK! /* She thought herself as she charged towards the still moving spiked ball. Throwing the chains towards each side of her body, Ahiru quickly began to spin the chains around into circles. Once she was within range, she launched the chains towards Chouji's rotating form and somehow managed to wrap the chains around him, completely entrapping him from any form of movement. "Now I've got you!" Crushing her feet onto the ground with concentrated chakra, she began to pull at the trapped Chouji and at the same time, she began to rotate upon her own feet. Think of Ahiru twirling on her toes like a ballerina while pulling the chained Chouji with her in a merry go round.

/ Uh... I feel sick... I wanna get off... / Was Chouji's only thoughts as he was spun around and around faster and faster, until suddenly, the chains around him unexpectedly loosened, releasing his disorientated form flying through the air only to slam into one of the only remaining rubble piles from the start of the match. Suffice to say, Chouji was completely knocked out, leaving Ahiru as the winner of this match.

Kaga signed tiredly as the arena was once more cleaned up to perfection from the last match. Even he was surprised at how much damage the powerhouse of the Stone team was able to render every nook and cranny of the arena floor into slabs of rock or mass of dust. "Well, let's get on with it." He muttered beneath his breath before

calling out in a strong voice once more. "Last match, Harate Eji versus Yakushi Suzumi, hajime!"

This last match was short and sweet in a way. Suzumi pulled out a long string with bells attached to through out the metallic wire. Twirling it around a bit, she moved into a small dance. As the string was twirled, the bells rang with a sensual melody, one that smoothed out any person's agitations and worries. In fact, even the audience were affected by this composite sound Genjutsu. However, Eiji wasn't going to be so easy to defeat. As the medic nin of his team, Eiji could detect chakra manipulation upon his own body easily. As such, all he had to do was focus his own chakra towards his ears. But instead of enhancing his hearing ability, he simply clogged it up with his own chakra, rendering him temporarily deaf. How that Suzumi's soothing Genjutsu no longer affects him, it was surprisingly easy for Eiji to launch a few senbons towards the Sound girl and immobilise her as she stood. It seems as if Suzumi was not expecting Eiji to so easily escape her Genjutsu and had no back up plan once her arms and hands were pierced with Senbon, immobilising those areas of her body. Having no escape and not being good with Taijutsu, Suzumi opted to surrender and give the match to Eiji.

Obviously, with such poor performance, none of the audience members were interested in taking either Eji or Suzumi as apprentices. And that ends the final match of day one for the second stage of the Chuunin exam.

To be continued.

(1) Look to Kageru's character profile page on my website for an explanation. You should be able to get there from my ffnet profile's page.

(2) Explanation of 'sound' from Wikipedia. Got to love it.

(3) Um. No reference, I just wanted to make a comment. Yes, I made Sasuke look pathetic and we all know he's stronger than that, but I needed him to suck this bad during the first fight so that he can lower his ego a bit for the second one. His second challenge will be much better, I promise.

(4) To understand what the hell I'm talking about, please read Kageru's character profile on my website for a better explanation.

(5) I know I made Asahi out to be a laid back, nonchalant character like Shikamaru to begin with. But he does have a very serious side to him. And it's this side that is usually on display.

(6) I didn't have time or place to get into Reiko's perverseness. For those of you who have read Reiko's profile will know what I'm talking about. But this first fight for Reiko isn't every important anyway. I actually wanted to emphasise more on Mogoto's muteness as a character. He/She is completely mysterious. Other than Mogoto's weapon of choice, we really know absolutely nothing about him or her.

(7) Man, I'm making Saporu sound so insane, but truthfully, that's just the alcohol taking.

(8) This is the 'original' name given by the OC's (Asagiri Kaori) creator, and I'm keeping it that way.

(9) This fight (between 2 new OCs) is not important at this moment in time. I will go into detail about Kei and Uzuru's techniques when they fight against the Cannon characters later on in the series.

(10) Yes. My version of Lee is weird. He's sort of a mix between what he use to be (our lovable Lee obsessed with the powers of youth) and someone who is slightly more mature and considerate. Not that the old Lee is BAD, but I want him to get with someone eventually (long way down the track) but still, it'd be good if he out grew his unique characteristics somewhat. Hope you don't mind. And I also hope I haven't made him to out-of-character.

(11) Think of how Tsunade and Sakura could smash the ground up, only not as deep or as large in size and range. Unlike Sakura and Tsunade who use Chakra to simply crush the earth. Ahiru (as a stone nin) uses the chakra to break up the earth into useable chunks for her to pick up and throw.

(12) Uh. I made it up. There is a Taijutsu move called 'Shou Geki Shou' (Rising Impact Palm) used by Jiroubu. So I just changed the last word to make it 'Rising Impact *Kick* '

Just to recap what's been happening, here's a basic summary of the results of various fights:

1. (Sand) Sabaku no Gaara Vs (Snow) Yuse Samure winner Gaara
2. (Cloud) Waisa Bado Vs (Leaf) Hyuuga Hinata winner Bado
3. (Leaf) Uchiha Sasuke Vs (Sound) Sasayaki Kageru winner Kageru
4. (Leaf) Hyuuga Neji Vs (Cloud) Sakeyama Asahi winner Neji
5. (Grass) Kawasaki Reiko Vs (Sound) Gengakku Mogoto winner Mogoto
6. (Wind) Temari Vs (Mist) Harate Echiko winner Temari
7. (Snow) Gojou Hikon Vs (Cloud) Sakeyama Saporu winner Saporu
8. (Leaf) Inuzuka Kiba Vs (Grass) Asagiri Kaori winner Kaori
9. (Grass) Midou Kei Vs (Stone) Iwama Uzuru draw
10. (Leaf) Tenten Vs (Mist) Kapasu Juro winner Tenten
11. (Stone) Jikizuka Tsubame Vs (Leaf) Yamanaka Ino winner Tsubame

12. (Sand) Kankuro Vs (Leaf) Aburame Shino draw
 13. (Leaf) Rock Lee Vs (Snow) Naja Daiku winner Daiku
 14. (Stone) Rensa Ahiru Vs (Leaf) Akimichi Chouji winner Ahiru
 15. (Mist) Harate Eiji Vs (Sound) Yakushi Suzumi winner Eiji
-

People exempted from further fights due to invite of apprenticeship:

- (Snow) Yuse Samure apprentice to Dokudes Hana (Seiko's dad)
- (Sand) Temari apprentice to Kazeha Akiko

Exam 2nd Stage Day 2 Duel Fights 1

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Thirty: 2nd Exam Day Two Duel Fights I

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** */ Thoughts I*, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: **More battles galore!** You get the drift... I was originally hoping to fit all these fights into one chapter. I couldn't!!! T.T Hence I'm going to have to cut this chapter in half (like I did the previous one) in order to fit it all in. Man! Why do I always give myself MORE work than necessary!?

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 30

"Good MORNING! Everyone! Hope you've all had a nice relaxing sleep last night; because TODAY is the second set of fights!" Jubei cheerfully exclaimed, completely ignorant of the multitude of eyes glaring at him.

Calmly ignoring the rising tension in the air, Hikari stepped forward and started announcing the new rules accompanying today's fights. "Now, all the challenged pairs have already been recorded down from yesterday afternoon. Once again, it's first come, first serve. However, for today, we decided to make it a little more interesting by having duel fights (1) occurring at the same time." Here, Hikari smirked at the confused gazes surrounding her.

"What this means is that we will be having two pairs of matches in the same arena at the same time. Think of it as a battle royal between the four contestants." Koushiro spoke out in explanation. "Other than that, the rules are pretty much the same as yesterdays. Anything goes unless Kaga-san says so. Of course, since you will be fighting with three opponents instead of just one, you may want to employ some strategies during these duel fights, unlike yesterday's one on one battles. That's just a thought of course."

Hikari coughed in order to gain back the attention that was stolen by her twin brother. "The duel pairings are once again chosen by a first come first serve basis – which means that the first two pairings join in one fight, then the next two pairings and so on and so forth." Letting the news sink in for a moment, Hikari continued with the rest of the explanations: "Now here's the list of duel fights that will occur in consecutive order: First match is by Sabaku no Gaara, Sasayaki Kageru, Midou Kei and Aburame Shino."

"Match two is by Gojou Hikon, Harate Echiko, Rock Lee and Sakeyama Saporu."

"Match three is by Rensa Ahiru, Gengakki Mogoto, Hyuuga Neji and Waisa Bado."

"Match four is by Inuzuka Kiba, Kawasaki Reiko, Jikizuka Tsubame and Sakeyama Asahi."

"Match five is by Uchiha Sasuke, Naja Daiku, Tenten and Asagiri Kaori."

"Match six is by Yamanaka Ino, Harate Eiji, Iwama Uzura and Hyuuga Hinata."

"Match seven is by Akimichi Chouji, Sabaku no Kankuro, Yakushi Suzumi and Kapasu Juro."

Koushiro spoke up once more when his sister had finished off reading out the list of fights. "Now, obviously, there's only going to be one winner out of each four combatants. None the less, Kaga-san will call out for interested parties willing to take on each of the four fighters as apprentices. So even if you lose, as long as you've impressed someone enough, they may take you up as an apprentice. Remember that! Good luck you all. The matches will start in 15 minutes; please return to the audience stands to await your matches as called."

The group of genins sat on the stands impatiently. Some did not show any care in the world regarding the new rules, while others felt even more anxious at the concept of fighting three opponents at the same time instead of just one.

"So... How are we supposed to do this?" Chouji asked quietly, fidgeting in his seat. He wanted to open a bag of chips to calm his nerves but he didn't have any on hand at the moment, and not to mention, he didn't want to get indigestions before his fight.

Sitting beside him, Shikamaru sighed. "So troublesome... I swear Jubei-san goes to the extreme sometimes to keep people off balance and make things unpredictable. He enjoys the tension and the fear that radiates off everyone. Hm... As for your question Chouji, there really isn't much to it other than fight."

"If you're lucky enough to be paired with an ally, maybe you could join forces to deal with the other opponents first before turning your full attention on each other. If that's the case, at the very least, you've secured your place as one of the last two fighters." Sakura answered from a row in front of the two, her analytical mind concluding that some strategy may be of great use in such situations. "This is after all survival of the fittest."

Shikamaru shrugged in nonchalance, once again glad that he wasn't participating in this insane exam. "Eh. Whatever..."

Eyeblink twitching at Shikamaru's reply, Sakura was all ready to launch into a set of arguments, wanting to enjoy another bout of verbal debate with the lazy genius when she was interrupted by Jubei's announcement that "15 minutes are up, so will the first four genins make their way down to the arena floor."

xxx XXX xxxx (**MATCH 1**)

Upon the arena floor were some new additions that weren't there from yesterday's battles. Now, there stood four strange statues, each depicting an animal of legend carved into granite stone. One of the statues depicted a graceful dragon curled around a mountain side. A second statue depicted a giant phoenix flying before the sunrise. The third statue depicted a grand tiger roaring before a lush forest, and the fourth statue depicted a massive turtle upon riding a tsunami size wave (2). These statues were placed strategically on four corners of the half circle arena, with lines carved into the soil connecting the immobile posts, creating the vision of a boxing ring. Obviously, the fights are to occur within the square boundary created by the four statues. It brought up more challenges for the Chuunin Exam participants as not only do they have to battle three opponents at the same time, they have to do it within a limited space, almost a third smaller than yesterday's battle arena size.

However, none of these details seem to have phased the four Chuunin examinees that now stood confidently in front of each of the four statues. Gaara and Kageru stood opposite one another in front

of their respective statues – Turtle for Gaara and Phoenix for Kageru. Adjacent to Gaara are the other two opponents standing in front of their own statue – Midou Kei in front of the statue of the Dragon and Shino in front of the statue of the Tiger.

Analysing the ready stances of the four teenagers, Kaga deemed them ready to fight. He silently called forth the Kage Kekai (Shadow Barrier) and this time, it only confined the area within the newly designated 'square' arena, resulting in a tall box like barrier that surrounds the genins. "Alright!" Kaga's strong voice silenced the murmuring audiences. "Match one, between Sabaku no Gaara, Sasayaki Kageru, Midou Kei and Aburame Shino. BEGIN!"

In an instant, Gaara's sand sped forward in three different directions, one aimed at Midou Kei, another in Shino's direction and the largest of the three sand boulders heading towards Kageru. From one of the adjacent sides (Dragon statue), Kei thrust out with his right hand what looks like an explosion note. "Kai." He released a minute amount of chakra from his fingers into the note to activate it. However, instead of the expected explosion, a large ball of fire burst out from the sealing note. The fire and sand impacted against one another in a split second, resulting in a large explosion scattering the sand particles (that haven't been turned to glass in that instant) to all directions; giving Kei some time to escape in the confusion. On Shino's side (Tiger statue), Shino himself simply used Kawarimi and dissolved into a swarm of insects, flying away to avoid Gaara's sand. Knowing how powerful Gaara is, Shino opted to fight the lesser of the two evils, namely, his original opponent – Midou Kei.

On the opposite side from Gaara (near the Phoenix statue), Kageru simply raised her left hand calmly. A split second before Gaara's sand impacts against her raised, open palm, she activated the metallic emulator device that was strapped around her left wrist. A sudden burst of high pitch sound wave echoed all over the arena, forcing audiences to block their ears in pain.

Having experienced the painful ringing of their ears the first time, almost all the audiences as well as the three other examinees raised

their hands simultaneously to cover their ears at seeing the familiar attack. Lucky for them, they managed to avoid most of the damage to their ear drums and were still able to battle on.

However, the high pitched echo blasted against Gaara's attacking sand and in that instant, the large mass of sand particles was dispersed into the air in all directions. Unlike yesterday's battle, in which Kageru waited patiently for Sasuke to launch another attack at her, this time, she opted to go after Gaara herself. She ran, with surprising speed for a Genin towards Gaara, holding her left hand out in preparation for a punch. Once she was within range, her fist struck forward quickly only to meet Gaara's shield of sand. Not particularly surprised, Kageru activated the emulator a second time which shocked Gaara directly due to his close proximity. Once again, the sand shield dispersed, leaving Gaara wobbling on his legs and vulnerable to attack. Kageru took her opportunity and gave Gaara a massive punch in the face, launching him some distance away from her.

Again, not giving Gaara any room to breath, Kageru lifted her right hand this time and called forth her summons. "Senai Jyashu (Shadow Snake Hands)!" The summoned snakes instantly appeared from the opening of her sleeveless shirt, erupting towards Gaara's tumbling form and quickly wrapped around the disorientated Sand Nin. However, Gaara wasn't so easy to capture either and his body suddenly burst into sand raining down from the gaps left between the snake summons.

/ Sand Bunshin! / Narrowing her eyes in suspicion, Kageru sensed Gaara's presence behind her just a split second before his sand once again tried to wrap around her body and crush her from within. "Sabaku Kyuu! (Desert Coffin)" Gaara growled as he closed his hand and the sands followed in his command, quickly swallowing Kageru's form. Victory was in his hand, Gaara thought to himself, that is, until Kageru's form dissolved into wet mud. */ Kawarimi.* / Gaara recognised as he looked around once more for his opponent.

While the two powerhouses were fighting between each other in the middle of the arena, Shino and Kei had made their way to the opposite corner to start their own battles (near the Phoenix statue). Having studied Shino's fight from yesterday, Kei knew that most of his specialised Genjutsu abilities would simply slide off Shino due to the boy's extensive use and communication with the insects that live inside his body. As such, this drastically lowers Kei's advantage in battle. However, since all Genjutsu would be useless against Shino anyway, this also means that Kei can concentrate most of his chakra on the activation of his special sealing notes, without bothering to maintain a Genjutsu over his own body (3).

Throwing down a smoke bomb, Kei prepared himself by gather a bunch of shurikens (hidden within his large coat) and attached tiny metallic strings to them, before throwing them towards the large cloud of smoke that obscured his vision. Attached to the strings however, are a few of his jutsu sealing notes – an interesting sealing knowledge and skill unique only to Kei and his family. When Shino finally emerged from the smoke, still rushing towards Kei's direction, Kei released the jutsus upon his jutsu seals, which just so happened to be attached to a metallic string that had someone found its way surrounding Shino through the use of flying shurikens.

"Kai!" A torrent of water erupted from the multiple seals and rained down upon Shino's drowned form, completely soaking the insect host. Not wasting a single moment, Kei quickly performed a set of hand seals in preparation for what he planned to do. "Kanashibari no Jutsu (Body Freeze Technique)." Releasing a large concentration of killing intent directed straight at Shino and all the insects that reside in the boy's body, Shino quickly found himself unable to move and completely vulnerable to whatever Kei has up his sleeve.

Rushing forward with all his speed, Kei slapped two combination jutsu seals upon Shino's chest before activating them. "Kai!" In that instant, Shino felt a sudden surge of electrical shock before it was followed quickly by a rush of cold air and freezing temperatures, wrecking havoc on Shino's still immobile form.

The electrical surge hit Shino (and his insects) like a sledge hammer, further disrupting their nerves system and communication structure by directly attacking the signals used between the host and its symbionts. Of course, being wet from Kei's original water attack didn't help their electrocuted situation. And the second assault by Kei resulted in the freezing of Shino's entire body.

Though not encasing Shino completely in ice (like what Samure had done with Gaara the previous day), Kei had managed to trap Shino and his insects within his body, resulting in neither being able to move and escape their frozen form.

On the other side of the arena, Kageru and Gaara were starting to bring out the big guns in their arsenal. Kageru threw a few shuriken into the air, aimed directly at Gaara, before performing the 'Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu'. While Gaara was busy fending off the hundreds of projectiles, Kageru continued to form hand seals, this time, calling forth the Doton: Doryuu Dan (Earth Element: Earth Dragon Bullets). A giant dragon head was emerged from the earth before it opened its mouth and shot out large boulder size bullets of earth. Kageru didn't stop with her assault however, she combined her previous technique with another Katon: Karyuu Dan (Fire Element: Fire Bullets). Breathing out a stream of fire, which ignited the flying earth bullets, the combined force of the giant, smouldering projectile impacted against Gaara's sand resulting in car size craters all round the two supposed genins.

Getting irritated by the constant barrage, Gaara stomped his feet apart and slapped his hands together in concentration. "Ryuusa Bakuryu! (Desert Avalanche)" A sudden upsurge of sand rose straight up to form a giant wall before Gaara and then it curved like a multitude of tsunami waves – all made of sand and all heading towards Kageru.

Quickly performing another set of seals, Kageru spat out of her mouth a dribble of mud before calling forth her technique. "Doton! Doryuu Heki! (Earth Element: Mudslide Barrier)" Jumping onto the

top of her large earth wall, Kageru watched passively as Gaara's sand slammed again and again into her chakra enforced wall. She could feel Gaara trying to worm his way into her earth based wall and create points of weakness within, forcing her to focus her chakra to counter against the onslaught as much as she could.

Behind these two powerhouses, Shino and Kei had just realised the trouble they were in. Unfortunately, they were too late to find a counter against the massive tidal waves of Gaara's sand. The wall of sand slammed into both Kei and Shino's vulnerable bodies with crushing force, snapping several bones in the process and burying Shino whole. However, one good thing about Gaara's sand is that it released Shino from his own frozen body entrapment. Once freed, Shino started crawling his way back onto the surface, desperately needing air to breathe. With the help of Kikaichu bugs, at least Shino knew which way was up and simply followed in their direction before he finally broke the surface.

Gasping in some much needed air, Shino cautiously looked around himself to see if there was much danger surrounding him. He was pleasantly surprised to see Kei's unconscious form buried in the sand some ten metres away from him. The grass Nin had half his face and most of his body was under a mountain of sand. Sighing in despondence, Shino silently marched towards Kei and slowly but surely pulled the boy out of the sand.

Although Shino was severely disappointed in his own performance and his constant loss against Kei's technique; that does not mean that he had any personal vendetta against the other boy. After all, they were both doing their damn hardest to acquire an invitation to apprenticeship. At the same time, Shino didn't really want the boy to die from suffocation or being crushed to death; as such, he pulled the other teenager out of harms way. Shino's Kikaichu bugs also informed him somewhat that Kei was caught off guard by Gaara's last attack and had fared much worse than Shino himself. The grass nin has several cracked (if not completely broken) ribs, crushed

shoulder blades, hip bones and several fractures all over his limbs. There were also many bruises across his body, including a large one on top of the boy's head. Overall, Shino came out of the ordeal much better than Kei did. It just goes to show that in a four match fight, you really gotta pay attention to ALL your opponents, not just the single one you're fighting against.

Releasing another sigh, Shino silently reorientated himself. / *No matter. This match isn't finished yet. And though I'm no where as strong as Gaara or that Sound Nin, I WILL do my best. I haven't done much so far, so I have to go all out this time. No more holding back.* / Shino made a decision and he stuck to it; and with that decision, he called forth all the insect inhabitants within his body to rise up and follow his bidding.

Kageru was distracted by Gaara's constant ploughing into her earthen wall. The Suna Shinobi's sand had chipped away a large layer from her chakra enhanced structure and while she has been throwing all sorts of long distance attacks (be they fire techniques, earth techniques, water techniques, Shuriken Kage Bunshins and more), Gaara's absolute defensive shielding protected him from all of it. Unfortunately for her, she knew that if she took one step onto the already sand covered arena, she was pretty much his prey instantly, and she definitely wasn't going to take that chance. With her full attention focused on Gaara, she did not sense Shino's Kikaichu bugs until it was too late.

In an instant Kageru's world darkened as Shino's insect army swarmed her in droves of hundreds blocking out her sight. She staggered as the ambush leached her chakra, leaving her disoriented as an unfamiliar feeling crept into her. Confusion set in as she failed to place the emotion gripping her, long years under Orochimaru's tutelage ingrained an inhuman belief in her own existence as that of a tool, artificial and ultimately disposable at the whim of its owner.

Gaara frowned as he found his main opponent being swallowed by a mass of insects. Glancing towards Shino, Gaara could not help but feel a little irritated at being disturbed from his own fight. With a flick of his wrist, Gaara sent two vertical waves of sand towards Shino's location.

"Mushikame no Jutsu! (Bug Jar technique)" Shino calmly stated as he called upon some of his Kikaichu bugs to form a semi-sphere around his location, protecting him completely from Gaara's sand assaults. Mentally, he sent a few more of his Kikaichu bugs to try and intercept Gaara, just to distract the boy some more.

Frowning further in concentration, Gaara switched tactics in his fight with Shino. Lowering both his hands, he twisted them rotationally, and as if in reaction to his command, the sand underneath Shino's feet started rotated, forming a quicksand that was rapidly swallowing Shino's body down with it. Shino's dissolved into a swarm of bugs, revealing itself to be nothing more than a mushi Bunshin (Bug Clone).

From behind Gaara, a mass of Kikaichu bugs collated together and reformed Shino's real body. In direct reaction to the threat's new location, Gaara's automatic sand shield rushed towards Shino's new location. Turning swiftly, Gaara caught the Leaf Shinobi in his hand. "Sabaku Kyuu!" Gaara was just about to crush the other boy when again, Shino's body dissolved into bugs, leaving behind an explosion note. "Shi..." Gaara didn't have time to swear as the explosion note detonated. At such a close range, even with the sand shielding, Gaara still found certain parts of his sand armour cracking under the intensity of the explosion.

Opening his eyes and glancing around once more, Gaara was openly shocked at seeing the multitude of explosion notes now surrounding him, held flimsily by a couple of flying Kikaichu bugs each holding an explosion note. / *Crap.* / Gaara mentally swore as suddenly, all the explosion notes erupted at the same time. Pushed by the forces that exploded from around him, Gaara gritted his teeth

in pain as he felt more of his sand armour cracking under the pressure (5).

Wincing as he opened one eye to look for his opponent once more, Gaara couldn't help but gap at the massive swarm of insects that now surround him (without the explosion notes thankfully). As if hearing a silent command, the Kikaichu bugs suddenly launched themselves at Gaara's unmoving form. "Suna Shigure! (Rain of sand)" Instead of the normal sand raining down from some high level, Gaara forced his sand to erupt in the opposite way. Hundreds upon hundreds of small sand pellets burst from the sand already on the ground. These pellets flew through the air at massive speeds, killing any insects that stood in its way. However, even with the rain of sand killing off a large number of the insects, Gaara felt that it wasn't doing enough to lessen the number of small enemies against him.

Even his sand shield was becoming increasingly busy with trying to protect him from the ever changing form of the swarm of insects. The tiny creatures would weave in and out of his defences as if they didn't exist. Had it not been for his final layer of defence (the sand armour), Gaara may have already been defeated.

Some distance away however, Kageru had finally escaped her prison of Kikaichu bugs by pulling a Kawarimi with a mud clone once more. Finally free and with much less chakra than she was use to, Kageru focussed most of her attention on the new addition to their (Gaara and Kageru's) original fight. "Katon! Karyuu Endan!" The fire dragon burst from Kageru's lips, flew through the air at rapid speeds and burned any bugs that stood in its way towards the crouching form of Shino some distance away.

Dodging the ever unpredictable fire dragon, Shino couldn't help but feel that he was at the end of his wits. He was low on chakra and not to mention he still had several cracked ribs from before (during Gaara's sand tsunami technique). Having no water based

techniques up his sleeve; Shino was forced to continue dodging as best he could.

Gaara, having seen the opportunity that presented itself, quickly flicked his wrist slightly and moved the sand directly below Shino's form, resulting in the Leaf nin slipping on his own feet. With no time to dodge, Shino could only cross his arms in front of his face before the giant face of the fire dragon plunged into his body, burning his face, hair, skin and clothes all at the same time. A large explosion erupted from the epicentre of impact and a truck size crater was formed in the middle of Gaara's sand. Delicate glass crystals formed around the edges of the crater and in the middle lay the smoky form of Shino, now covered with third degree burns over eighty percent of his body. With their master severely injured and unable to give any commands, the Kikaichu bugs eventually left both Gaara and Kageru alone, flying back to their smoky host in mourning. If Shino does not get any aid soon, he may well die from his wounds.

Now, only two of the original four members from match one are left. Gaara and Kageru glared at one another, each willing to pull off one final attack on the other, having depleted their own chakra to dangerous levels. Launching into a set of seals, Kageru finished her technique a fraction of a second before Gaara. "Katon Goukakyu no Jutsu!" Instead of launching one single grand fireball, Kageru continued to breath in deep after each release and produced several grand fireballs – one after another, all heading towards Gaara.

Slamming his palm onto the loose sand before him, Gaara summoned forth one layer of sand wall after another, each erupting from the ground further and further in front of Gaara, creating a series of defensive walls to protect him from anything Kageru could throw at him. The first fireball impacted against the first wall, creating a glass structure in that instant. The second fireball destroyed the newly created glass creation before impacting against the second wall, and another, a second glass structure was formed. This continued for some time, before all of Kageru's fireballs were

dissolved and Gaara's sand wall completely crumbled. In that instantly, Gaara took the chance to have his favoured sand wrap around Kageru's form. This time, instead of wrapping wholly around Kageru's body, Gaara merely had his sand encapsulate Kageru's legs and both her arms (in different directions) creating a vision of a cross. "Sabaku Kyuu. Surrender or else I'll crush all your limbs." Gaara threatened, beads of sweat drifting down from his brow.

Not even flinching in pain, Kageru merely opened her mouth wide open to let her strangely long tongue stretch out into the distance towards Gaara. The tongue suddenly formed into a snake and the snake inevitably bit into Gaara's cloth covered shoulder. Wincing painfully at the retaliation, Gaara angrily pulled the snake's head away from his slightly bleeding shoulder. The snake returned to its former shape of a tongue before flowing back into Kageru's graceful lips. "Sabaku Sousou! (Desert Funeral!)" Gaara's sand, as promised, crushed Kageru's legs and arms (including both her arm guards) into minute fractures. Pain laced through Kageru's form from each limb, but she kept silent, lacking the capacity to express her pain.

Glaring hotly at Kageru's impassive face – a face that reminded Gaara all too painfully of what he had been once, not so long ago, Gaara's temper finally reached its peak. The sand that once encased Kageru's limbs released its hold, only to run up Kageru's limp body and covered her entire face. / *Death by suffocation. Death by crushed skull.* / Gaara promised himself as he slowly closed his hands once more – for one final time. "Sabaku Sou..."

"ENOUGH GAARA!" A single voice sliced through the atmosphere in the arena cleanly. Gaara impulsively looked up towards the VIP stands (sculpted out from the very mountain sides) and found the brilliant blue eyes of one Uzumaki Naruto (6) gazing at him with resolution. The Uzumaki heir wasn't begging him, he was ordering him. And Gaara found himself unable to go against his gaze, unable to go against said order. Slowly but surely, Kageru's immobile body dropped onto the sand covered arena like a broken doll. And in a way, she was... a very broken doll.

Turning away from the conclusion of this fight, Gaara slowly made his way towards the audience stands. He was the only one out of the four contestants that could still walk away with his limbs in tack (relatively), but he didn't feel as if he's won. In fact, he felt as if he was disappointed in himself somehow. As if he had regressed back to his old ways and was feeling rather depressed over that fact. No matter what the reason, he had hurt all three of his opponents severely. They were all incapacitated by him and his techniques, one way or another. For once in a long time, Gaara felt truly guilty for hurting someone that was not his precious few.

Silently dissolving the Kage Kekai (Shadow Barrier) and returning the arena to its pristine condition once more, Kaga could not help but glance over at the two unconscious boys (one suffering from severe burns and the other with multiple fractures and broken bones). This match had been deadly in every sense of the word. He then turned his attention to the broken form of Kageru, who had yet shed a single tear or cry from his crushed limbs.

Several of the Gate Guardians came to collect all three of the injured combatants. And once the arena was clear of everyone except the Shadow Master, Kaga called for any interested parties willing to taking anyone from the last match as an apprentice.

Surprising, two people stood, both from the same family. Shinzo Yami, one of the Gate Guardians himself, was interested in taking Aburame Shino as his own apprentice; and his father – Oniyoubu Jin was willing to take Midou Kei as his apprentice. Overall, out of the members of match one of the second day, it was the two members who came last... that received an invite to become apprentices; not the two who won.

Day two of these duel fights was definitely turning out to be an interesting day indeed. Shaking his slightly to clear his thoughts, Kaga called for the next four combatants to come forward. "Will the following people please make their way to the arena – Gojou Hikon, Harate Echiko, Rock Lee and Sakeyama Saporu!"

"Wow. That was an intense battle." Kiba muttered under his breath. Akamaru whimpered slightly from within his master's jacket, agreeing with his master's assessment.

Sitting beside the Inuzuka, Chouji gulped down in apprehension. He really didn't think he could survive such devastating attacks and intense battling.

Sitting next to Chouji, Shikamaru could only sigh in relief once more, mentally thanking whatever gods up above that let him become Chuunin during the last exam in Konoha. He didn't think he'd be able to survive these battles either if he had been forced to participate.

xxx XXX xxxx **(MATCH 2)**

Similar to the previous match, the four new contestants found themselves standing in front of their own statues at the start of the match. Hikon found herself standing before the Phoenix statue, opposite her stood Echiko of the Mist before the Turtle statue. Adjacent to them were Lee (in front of the Dragon statue) and Saporo, the Cloud Ninja (in front of the Tiger statue). "Match two, between Goujo Hikon, Harate Echiko, Rock Lee and Sakeyama Saporo. BEGIN!" Kaga announced and four contestants immediately launched into their own attacking stances.

With those words, each of the four Genins started their own techniques and beginning stances. Hikon quickly performed one of her favoured Genjutsu techniques: "Yuki no Hitohira no mai. (Dance of Snow Flakes)" Silently, Hikon's body dissolved into tiny pieces of snow drifting off into the wind. Saporo summoned forth another large bottle of sake and immediately began to drink it all down in gulps. Lee simply stood in his ready stance, prepared for anything that may come his way. Echiko, on the other hand smirked confidently as she too performed her own technique: "Kirigakure no Jutsu! (Hidden Mist Technique)" / *After all, they can't hurt me if they can't see me... but I can hear them! /*

A large cloud of mist instantly covered the entire square arena. A few minutes later, several loud exclamations could be heard from inside the mist, but none of the audiences could see anything. However, from the sounds themselves, one could only gather that an intense Taijutsu battle is being held within the thick mist.

Clanks of metal could be heard, depicting the clashes between kunai and sword – one could only assume that either Hikon or Saporu was the one that held the kunai while Echiko would definitely be the one with the sword. Distinct shouts of 'Konoha Senpuu' and 'Konoha Dai Senpuu' also showcased that Lee was heavily involved in the fight as well. How he could possibly cope with fighting against invisible opponents, no one knew; but he seemed to be fine on his own. Other indistinct sounds such as guttural moans and manic laughter could also be heard from the invisible calamity; most of the audiences assumed that this would be Saporu – who was once again drunk on her feet.

Several more minutes passed as more sounds were emitted through out the battleground; the audiences were literally on the edge of their seats wanting to know what the hell was happening, but the mist completely blocked their view. Even their imaginations were stretched beyond limit as they try their best to make sense of the oral discord that they could hear but not see. One could only hope that Echiko drops her technique soon, or else no one would be able to make heads of tails as to what's going on.

Within the mist, a fierce battle between the four combatants was currently being held. "Suiton: Suiryuu no Jutsu! (Water Element: Water Dragon Technique)" From within the Mist, Echiko called forth a water dragon attack. The slippery dragon slammed against, Lee, knocking the boy away before swerving in order to attack Saporu. With her dragon now directed at the Cloud nin, Echiko pulled out her swords once more and went in search for Lee and the unseen Hikon.

Swaying slightly on her feet, Saporu managed to bend her body in an awkward curve, barely missing the gaping mouth of the water

dragon. Twirling on her feet, Saporo skipped once and then twice again, before landing some distance away from the deadly water dragon. Unexpectedly, Saporo pulled out another sake bottle from her summoned scroll, filling her mouth full of undiluted sake and then throwing her still half-full bottle of sake away. With her hands free from holding anything, she quickly launched into her own set of hand seals. "Katon: Karyuu no Jutsu! (Fire Element: Fire Dragon Technique)" Opening her mouth slightly, Saporo burst forth a large fire dragon, its power enhanced exponentially by the alcohol that was still in Saporo's mouth (7).

The fire dragon burned a direct path towards the water dragon, each with only one aim in mind – to destroy the other. A giant eruption exploded as the newly released fire dragon slams into Echiko's previous water dragon. The conflicting elemental dragons clashed in a fury of power and noise. The collision between them instantly formed into a storm cloud of high temperature and heated steam, accompanied by an ear-piercing sizzling sound effect. Soon, the newly created steam was absorbed back into Echiko's original mist, giving it more water to manipulate and thicken the density.

Relying on instinct alone, Lee barely managed to dodge a swipe directly at his neck from Echiko's sword, before he was cut on his thigh by someone – he could only assume was Hikon, as he couldn't see his opponent at all. Ignoring his bleeding thigh, Lee jumped to avoid a rather loud assault from Saporo, who though not acting very coordinated, she still managed to be an unpredictable fighter.

Landing somewhat ungracefully due to his bleeding thigh, Lee slipped on something on the ground and tumbled backwards. Wincing as he landed on his butt, Lee glared at the offending object that had made him slip in the first place, which turned out to be Saporo's quarter-full sake bottle. It must have slipped her hands when Echiko called forth the mist at the beginning of the match. Frowning at the sake bottle, Lee really couldn't understand how the hell Saporo became so strong the moment she drank it. Maybe there

was some sort of special medicine inside the sake. Taking a chance, Lee tipped the rest of the bottle's contents directly down his own throat. The instant the liquid ecstasy touched down in Lee's stomach, he felt an unnatural surge of warmth and deluded cheerfulness that he had never felt before. His body became uncoordinated, and yet he had never felt so strong. */ Hmmm... maybe there was some sort of special medicine inside the drink. /* That was the only sensible thought that passed through Lee's mind before it blanked out and became a torrent of heat and chaos.

"YEEEEAAAHHHHH!" Saporo screamed as she did a split in the middle of the arena, not really sure why but moving with the flow none the less. Unknown to her, she barely managed to ducked beneath a swipe from Hikon's invisible kunai. Feeling frustrated for no particular reason, Saporo suddenly struck out with a punch directly in front of her. She felt her closed fist slamming against something solid and yet unseen. A pained "Oooff!" was heard before the unseen weight disappeared once more.

Bending down onto her stomach, Saporo crawled somewhat forward like a bug when she felt an unexpected weight trip over her flat form. "What the Fxxk!" Echiko screeched as she tripped over the compromising form of Saporo lying rather absurdly on the ground.

"TAGGGG! You're... IIIIIITTTTTTTT!!!!!" Saporo sang in a loud and obnoxious way, before she flipped onto her back, now laying flat on her back while still on the ground. Lifting her legs forward towards her chest, she kicked forth with all her power. Her nimble legs slammed into Echiko's unprotected butt launching the poor mist Shinobi far away from her. Understandably, Echiko screeched even louder as she felt someone kick her bottom at such a close range. Not only did it hurt, a lot, but it severely bruised her pride.

Humiliated and tumbling forward, Echiko could barely see through her own convoluted mist before a green clad arm suddenly appeared out of no where and slammed directly into her face.

"Oi! That HURT! You know!" A red faced Lee exclaimed loudly from beside the dizzy Echiko. Now, normally, had Lee simply slammed his forearm into someone's face, they would feel pain, but not as disorientated as Echiko was currently feeling. Unknown to Echiko, ever since Lee's abysmal performance during the first exam, he had started wearing weights on his forearms as well as his legs for the purpose of strengthen his arm muscles. This means that Echiko wasn't just hit by Lee's physical arm, but also by about 20 kilograms worth of hard, dense, metallic weights.

Frowning moodily at the staggering Echiko, Lee suddenly smiled with an impish grin. "You wanna dansu... welllll why doincha say soooooo..." Lee suddenly dropped down onto his knees, twisting around in a circle, he accidentally knocked over Echiko's legs, tripping her further and landing her flat on her back on the unforgiving ground. "GROUP HUGGGGG!!!" Jumping enthusiastically, Lee landed on Echiko's stomach in a body slam.

All the air rushed out of Echiko's poor, crushed lungs in that one move and Echiko instantly felt blackness consume her eyesight. With a final dismal cough, Echiko collapsed into unconsciousness. Wiggling against her unmoving body for a few seconds, Lee soon lost interest in the immobile Mist Shinobi before dragging himself onto his feet.

With Echiko finally out of commission, the mist covering the arena soon lifting, revealing a drunken Saporo swaying on her feet, and a red faced Lee glaring at her hotly. Echiko's unmoving form rested only a foot away from Lee's shaking knees, while Hikon was nowhere to be found, still encased in her invisibility Genjutsu.

"AAAAHHHHHHHHH" A shared scream erupted from both Saporo and Lee, for no particular reason, before the two suddenly rushed towards one another in a seeming fit of rage. Lee pushed forward with a punch, Saporo swerved on her own feet to avoid before thrusting forward with an elbow. Lee lifted his legs up and blocked it and then he fell backwards, just in time to jump and kick off with his

other food towards Saporo's face. Saporo twirled on her ankle like a ballerina, pushing away the force of Lee's kick with her rotation. Landing on his back, Lee pulled upwards with the strength of his waist into a handstand, before slipping his legs apart into a helicopter manoeuvre and started turning around and around on his hands, creating a human top. Saporo jumped backwards in order to avoid the spinning human known often as Konoha's Azure beast, waiting for the green clad boy to stop spinning on his own volition. It didn't take long before Lee crumbled onto the ground, severely dizzy and unable to see straight. "Woah... wheeen did trees turn puuurrplish and is tha an oc... octo... octopuseeee...?"

"WAM!!! BOOOODDDYYYY SLAM!!!" Saporo ran towards the disorientated Lee, aiming to jump and slam down on the dizzy boy, only to trip on her own two feet and fall straight down, slamming her delicate face onto the hard ground.

Several metres away from the embarrassing pair, Hikon – while still cloaked under her Genjutsu - sweat-dropped. */ That's it. I'm ending this fight while I still have some dignity and sanity left.* / She thought to herself determinedly. Performing a set of seals upon her hands, Hikon spoke silently to herself. "Shiroiyuki no Yume (Dreams of White Snow)."

Out of no where, delicate snow flakes started drifting down from the clouds. The ever soft looking snow gently rested against Saporo and Lee's swaying forms. Both genins eyes glazed as they watched the white snowflakes with childish awe. Slowly, their eyes closed as if in slumber, their body slumped in a relaxed state. Dropping down onto their knees, lying down on their stomachs, stretching with their hands, both Lee and Saporo drifted into sleep with a small smile on their lips. And all around them, the snowflakes kept drifting; delicately slow, beautifully tiny in the winds.

"Rock Lee and Sakeyama Saporo are unable to battle. Victory goes to Gojou Hikon!" Kaga announced as Hikon finally dropped out of her invisibility cloak as well as her sleep inducing Genjutsu that she

used on Lee and Saporu. Soon, Kaga dropped the Kage Kekai, and some members of the Gate Guardians had to drag the comatose forms of Lee, Saporu and Echiko away from the arena while Hikon lightly stepped away, without a single scratch on her body. "Now, is anyone interested in taking any of the current examinees up as an apprentice?" Kaga called out once more, and was surprised that he was answered almost immediately.

"I'd like to take Hikon-kun as an apprentice, Kaga-san." Hikari spoke up from where she stood next to the other Gate Guardians. Kaga lifted his eyes in surprise but nodded in acquisition. Behind him, Hikon was also surprised, but she would definitely not turn down a chance to train with one of the best Genjutsu and Light experts in the entire Kuunoki village.

"I would also like to invite Harate-san as an apprentice once she has regained consciousness." A blue haired, middle aged lady spoke up from the audience stands.

Kaga nodded again in agreement. "As you wish, Kaiba-sama(8). Now, will the next match's combatants please make your way down to the arena so that we may start the next match?"

xxx XXX xxxx **(MATCH 3)**

Like the previous matches before them, the four genins soon found themselves standing in front of their respective statues: Neji in front of the Dragon statue; Ahiru before the Phoenix statue; Waisa Bado – the Cloud nin in front of the Tiger statue and lastly, Gengkakku Mogoto (the voiceless Sound Nin) standing before the Turtle statue. All four were tense and anxious for this fight to begin. Having watched the previous fights, they all knew that once the match starts, it's going to be intense.

"Match three, between Rensa Ahiru, Gengkakku Mogoto, Hyuuga Neji and Waisa Bado. BEGIN!" Kaga announced the start of the match.

In that instant, Bado once more rushed towards Neji's position, hands fisted in a ready stance to punch the Hyuuga boy in. "Man! I'll have so much fun beating the shxt out of you Hyuugas!" Bado taunted with a wide grin, even while Neji activated his Byakugan with an angry expression of his face. Unfortunately for the two boys, they were interrupted by a stream of rock fractures that suddenly sprouted out of the earth, separating the two boys as well as the playing field all together.

"Oi! Oi! Forgot about me! That's going to be your biggest mistake, boyo!" Ahiru smirked with sadistic glee as she pulled out her fist from beneath the ground. "Let's ROCK!" Stomping her foot hard onto the earth's surface, a large boulder of pure rock suddenly rocketed up into the air. "AHHHH!" Slamming her opened palm into the seemingly floating rock, Ahiru pushed the massive boulder in Neji's direction, before calling up another large boulder and slamming it towards Bado – both of whom were still standing on opposite sides of the wall of stone.

"Kaiten!" Neji quickly performed his defensive Jutsu and managed to grind and shatter the boulder that had been flying his way.

Bado on the other hand, knowing instinctively that 'lightning' element is stronger than 'earth' element, simply charged up his right hand with lightning enhanced chakra and punched his fist right through the boulder as if it weighed nothing at all. "Now whose underestimating who, biatch! My lightning is superior to your dirt!" Bado taunted back with full confidence while Ahiru only narrowed her eyes in irritation.

"Oh Yeah! Take this!" Jumping high into the air, Ahiru started twirling herself on a horizontal axis like a ballerina, changing her body into that of a spinning top before falling down with the pull of gravity in the direction of Bado. Bado barely had time to side step away from Ahiru's landing – which created an impact crater some 3 metres deep and 5 metres wide.

"Hakke Kusho! You're opponent is me, Cloud nin!" Neji shouted as his palm blast pushed Ahiru far away from his chosen opponent,

Bado.

Landing on the ground roughly, Ahiru pulled herself to her feet and glared angrily at the two boys who had pulled her out of her fun. She spat some saliva out of her lips before she finally noticed a presence behind her. Turning around swiftly, she gazed upon the nonchalant stance of Mogoto – the Sound Nin – who stood in a straight back position, with one leg crossed over the other leg's bend knee, and on top of his or her legs sat the Gengakki (Qin) Stringed instrument; Mogoto's hands were prepared as he or she strum a few notes in readiness. Ahiru grinned with anticipation. "Well then, guess I'll be taking my frustrations out on you, Sound Nin."

With Ahiru finally out of the way, Neji and Bado could concentrate solely on each other. Bado wanting to play with and then humiliate this Hyuuga the same way as he had with the previous Hyuuga; and Neji just wanted to bash Bado's face in really badly, as revenge for how Hinata had been treated yesterday.

Without further ado, Neji activated his Byakugan and rushed towards Bado, wanting to inflict as much pain as possible. "Jyuken Hou: Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou! (Gentle Fist Style: Divinity Sixty Four strike)" Neji yelled as he prepared one of his most devastating techniques.

"Two Strikes!"

"Four Strikes!"

"Eight Strikes!"

"Sixteen Strikes!"

"Thirty two strikes!"

"Sixty Four strikes!"

Although Bado was pushed backwards and tumbling over his feet by the barrage of precise strikes Neji had flung him, after a few seconds or reorientation, the Cloud Ninja somehow managed to stand back up. Swiping a few imaginary dust mites off his precious vest, Bado smirked cruelly at Neji. "Eh, is that is? It kinda itched... but if that's all you've got to throw at me, *Hyuuga* , then you're weaker than the one I fought yesterday!" Bado continued to taunt the already enraged prodigy.

Growling lowly under his breath, Neji snarled back in fury. "You will pay for what you did to Hinata-sama, I swear on my *Hyuuga* name!" Although outwardly raging, mentally Neji had stayed relatively calm and was able to analyse everything that happened in regard to Bado's chakra system. */ He has another artificial chakra highway travelling through those sashes and leather belts. It gives him perfect chakra control as well as speed in manoeuvring his chakra to areas where he needs it to go. Not only that, but he can also absorb any chakra damage inflicted by his enemies through those extra protection. Basically, he's wearing a chakra armour that will stop any internal damage caused by chakra attacks. /* Neji concluded analytically.

/ If Chakra attacks don't work then I guess I'll just have to use the good old fashion way. / Neji decided as he once again rushed towards Bado.

"Is that all you know, *Hyuuga*? This is getting old!" The ever arrogant Bado snorted as he readied himself into a Taijutsu stance, fisting his hands together in preparation. Neji dodged the first punch from Bado, tucking as close as possible within Bado's personal space and thrust forward an open palm with Chakra infused in them. However, at the last possible second, Neji's hand closed into a fist, and the chakra that was once coming out of the tenketsus on his palm became circulated all off the enclosed fist, enhancing the power of the punch as he smashed it into Bado's sash covered chest.

"Uhp!" Bado's face showed shock, pain and horror a split second before he was thrust several metres backwards due to the sheer

power in Neji's punch.

Up in the audience stands, Lee's mouth dropped open at Neji's seeming abandonment of his usual style – the Jyuuken. "That's my..." He trailed off as a sudden surge of anger and frustration filled his core. Now, normally Lee is a pretty forgiving guy, but right at this moment in time, he truly felt used in the most disgusting way possible. "What IS it with people **COPYING MY STYLE!!** " Lee growled under his breath, as Tenten tried her best to calm him down.

Tumbling through the ground once more, Bado couldn't help but clutch at his poor, injured stomach in agony. He could feel his own chakra going towards the wounded area in order to try and heal the injury as soon as possible, but that didn't mean it wasn't painful. Squeezing his eyes tightly in pain, Bado gasped for any available air into his rather tortured lungs at the moment, completely stunned by the attack that had been launched at him from his opponent. Glaring once more towards Neji, Bado wheezed as he spoke: "That... was not Jyuuken." He argued weakly.

Neji confidently marched towards Bado. "Of course not; I'm not an idiot. Jyuuken doesn't work on you so why should I continue to use a style that won't help me win. Just like Hinata-sama started using her medical training as an alternate means of fighting you, I so happen to know other Taijutsu styles, namely the Iron Fist technique." At the back of Neji's mind, he silently thanked both Gai and Lee for always sparing with him whenever they trained. */ Had I not spent years fighting against Lee and Gai, I may not have been able to pick up on many of the attack and defensive stances they use in their day-to-day training. I'll admit, this style does not suit me one bit, it's too aggressive and too muscle consuming. However, I can use it to some extent and if it'll help me win this battle, then so be it. /*

"I'm not done yet." Bado growled as he staggered to his feet, the injuries done to his abdomen healed enough to allow him free movement without too much of a strain. "I won't fall for the same trick

twice." For the first time in all his fights, Bado was showing a serious face, the face of a real ninja.

"Good, it'd be no fun bashing your face in if you don't provide any challenge." Tightening his fists once more and enhancing its strength with Chakra, Neji prepared another barrage of hits and punches towards Bado's still recovering body. *I don't have enough physical strength as Gai and Lee does. They've been conditioning their bodies for years with weights and constant practice to harden their hands in order to be able to create that large amount of damage with one hit. I don't have that, so I'll have to enhance my fists with as much chakra as I can without doing damage to myself.* / Neji thought firmly to himself as he once again punched Bado's face harshly.

Bado struck with a side kick towards Neji. The Hyuuga ducked under the assault and countered with punch of his own, Bado slipped back in order to dodge the strike before squatting on one leg while performing a sweeping kick with the other. Neji jumped into the air, rotated on his sides in a horizontal axis before performing a twirling kick of his own. Bado blocked the chakra enhanced kick with his own chakra enhanced forearm and lifted his knee upwards towards Neji's currently vulnerable head. Thrusting an open palm forward, Neji quickly released a large barrage of condensed chakra. "Hakke Kuushou (Eight Trigrams: Vaccum Palm)". The release of chakra and air between the two boys pushed both combatants far apart from one another with both Neji and Bado finally landing at least thirty metres away from one another.

"Hmph." Bado performed a quick set of hand seals before his body suddenly erupted with small sparks of electricity running all over his limbs. "No matter what, you still rely too much on Taijutsu. If you can't touch me, you can't hurt me. You Hyuuga's were never good at long range attacks; that's your ultimate weakness." Even bruised and slightly injured, Bado still held on to his arrogance and threats.

Neji simply narrowed his eyes in concentration. "That may be so, but I'll still kick your butt." He stated in a manner that was so uncharacteristic of him, that it threw both of his team mates off as

they watched their usually stoic team member in the midst of his battle. Although Neji took his time and glared at his opponent, his Byakugan eyes were busy analysing every inch of Bado's form and coming to the conclusion that Bado had activated some sort of lightning armour around his body – the question now is how will he get around the armour. */ I'm not fast enough to beat the speed of lightning, but there must be another way... Wait, the lightning is created by chakra and whatever is created by chakra can be broken by chakra.* / He realised with sudden clarity.

/ This guy must have amazing chakra control, I'll admit that much. He's using his artificial chakra circuit to redirect his chakra wherever it is needed all over his body – not only to enhance certain parts for attack and defensive purposes, or to heal injured areas, but also give him the ability to dissipate any chakra based attacks on his body. Not only that, he's a cloud Nin and able to form a lightning armour all around his body to protect him from physical attacks as well. He's got a defence against chakra based attacks as well as a defence against physical attacks. This guy... he's like me and Gaara... his defences are amazing even though he pretends that he's more of an offensive fighter. / Neji couldn't help but admire Bado's system of defences (9), it was truly unique and impressive.

"I'll make you eat your words." Bado snarled rather viciously before he released a large amount of chakra, enhancing his lightning armour as well as creating a distinct 'chakra' field (10) all over his body. This special chakra field somehow resulted in Bado rising into the air by about one inch off the ground. Now, most people wouldn't have a clue why Bado would waste all his chakra on making himself hover off the ground; but Neji was a genius and quickly began analysing the benefits of such a feat. */ Shxt! If he's off the ground; that means that there's no traction slowing him down, which means that his speed will rocket skywards like nothing before.* / As if brought on by Neji's thoughts, Bado chose that very moment to strike against the Hyuuga boy.

The Cloud Nin moved fast, very fast. There was no dust or air that was disrupted by his movements; he simply glided over them with his Chakra field as he wasn't there in the first place – like a feather through the air. Neji found himself hard pushed to dodge and block any of the Cloud Nin's massively fast punches, kicks, elbows and strikes. Not to mention, Neji could feel his blocking arms becoming severely numb and difficult to move due to Bado's chakra field as well as his electrical armour influencing Neji's own body responses. / *I can't keep this up any longer.* / Neji thought to himself, feeling rather pressured as he was forced backwards by Bado's assault. Needing room to breath, Neji decided to take a chance. "Kaiten!" Spinning and releasing his chakra at the same time, Neji managed to push Bado (and his chakra field) back several metres to give himself some room to fight.

Pausing in the midst of their fight, both boys took some time to regather themselves again; both combatants were panting for breath, shoulders heaving with tension and stress. / *Looks like it strains him a lot to keep his chakra field and lightning armour up all the time. This battle has become a battle of attrition, it seems.* /

Neji's breathed in deeply, still trying to find a weakness in his opponent's form. / *Okay, let's start from the beginning, the Chakra field he's created lets him move incredibly fast but doesn't really protect him from physical attacks or chakra attacks. Then, he has his lightning armour that stops physical attacks because as I punch him, my hand becomes shocked and numb with time and it reduces the impact I'm able to put forth. Third, he wears those strange sashes as an artificial chakra coil system to protect his body from any of my chakra attacks. He has perfect chakra control and can manoeuvre his chakra to any part of his body to protect, enhance, heal or enforce the power of that particular area.* / Grumbling mentally to himself, Neji bit his lip in concentration. / *There must be a weakness. There must be one point I can attack where he can't protect himself. I mean, even the Hyuuga's Byakugan has a blind spot! ... A BLIND SPOT! I **AM** a genius!* / Neji suddenly grinned as a plan formed

within his mind. */ I'm putting a lot of faith in this manoeuvre but if it works, the payoff would be enormous. /*

"Let's finish this!" Neji's determined voice rang out through the arena before he once more rush towards his opponent.

"Gladly, you pussy foot Hyuuga!" Bado yelled as he too launched himself forward into the throng of battle.

Punch after punch, kick after kick, knees and elbow blocked and countered, both boys weaved between, over and under each other's attacks. Finally, Neji saw an opening on Bado's guard and took this chance to implement his plan. Swerving between Bado's arms, Neji slid behind the Cloud Nin, quickly releasing chakra onto his left arm, he spent a split second to concentrate the chakra into a spinning motion around his forefinger that laced down his entire hand and arm. */ Forgive me, Naruto-kun, but I'm gonna borrow the concept of your Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wrath) (11) for a moment. /* Neji thought to himself as he struck at Bado's upper neck (just on the base of his skull) with brutal accuracy.

Neji's guest was correct, the point was vulnerable to attack and he quickly pushed a large amount of chakra into the tiny tenketsu point located on the base of Bado's head. */ As long as he can't see where my attacks are coming from, he can't use his perfect chakra control to protect the spot from my attacks. It's so simple, it's brilliant. And even though he's still got his sash's activated, as long as I disorientate his mind from functioning properly, no amount of skill in chakra control will help him in defended himself from further attack. And with my version of the Tenshi no Doki activated, I'm not affected by the Lightning Armour that still surrounds him. However, I'm incredibly lucky that he was a little too tired to use his Chakra field and move away in time. Now to FINISH IT! /*

Stumbling on his feet, Bado released his defensive techniques for a second due to the sudden dizziness that wavered through his head. However, even though he was disorientated, he could still hear clearly Neji's last words to him before he finally blanked out. "This is

for HINATA-SAMA!" A forceful, non-chakra enhanced punch impacted right into Bado's skull. Suffice to say, the Cloud Nin was unconscious even before he landed painfully on the hard ground.

"Doton: Retsudo Tenshou (Earth Element: Splitting Earth Force)" Slicing her hand vertically down onto the ground before her, Ahiru literally splits the earth apart directly beneath Mogoto's feet. The sound Nin had no choice but to flip his or her main weapon – the stringed instrument Gengakki – back to an upright position, grab hold of it in a tight grip and jumped to the left side in order to avoid falling down into the earth's abyss created by Ahiru Jutsu.

"Not fast enough!" Ahiru called as she suddenly appeared before Mogoto, his right fist (completely covered by rock sediments like worn armour) swung forward with all her might towards Mogoto's face. In the last second, Mogoto managed to lift his/her arm up in defence, but his/her pitiful block did little against Ahiru's powerful (rock covered) fist, and Mogoto was flung backwards by the force of it all.

Running towards her staggering opponent, Ahiru positioned herself at just the right angle to order to knee Mogoto right in his/her stomach arena. "Shoushitsu! (12)" Ahiru announced as she powerfully kneed Mogoto in an upwards direction. Swinging her body in a vertical loop while still standing on one leg, Ahiru kicked Mogoto's head with her other leg, its power enhanced by chakra as well as her full body weight. Suffice to say, Mogoto's bruised and battered body was once more flung away by the powerful force of Ahiru's hits.

Smirking confidently, Ahiru walked forward towards her barely recovering opponent with slow but aggressive steps. "Is that all you have? You seem weaker than I first thought." She smiled with an arrogant posture, waiting for Mogoto to get back onto his/her feet.

Finally back on his/her feet, Mogoto got into a ready stance before quickly performing the first set of seals anyone had ever seen

him/her perform. The Gengakki strapped onto Mogoto's back suddenly erupted with movement. Hundreds of strings spiked out of the wooden instruments sides and front, flying through the air at rapid speeds towards Ahiru like a giant tentacle monster with almost infinite number of tentacles.

Ahiru was (at the moment) frozen in silent shock that instantly wore off as she glimpsed how close the strings were coming towards her. Jumping backwards and pulling of a half turn twist, Ahiru barely managed to avoid the grasps of many of the thin strings. She didn't have time to perform any Jutsus of her own so she had no choice to be unravel her own chains (that was originally wrapped around her forearms) and struck back at Mogoto's hundreds of strings. Back and forth the strings fought against Ahiru's chains, seemingly coming to a stand still of long distance strikes.

However, with Ahiru's concentration split between the string targets on her right, left, front, above and behind, she didn't noticed the strings that were burrowing out from beneath her until too late. Tripping unexpectedly, Ahiru looked down just as a string wrapped around her ankle and pulled her upwards into the air. Within seconds, the rest of her body was completely wrapped up like a cocoon within Mogoto's strings, not dissimilar to how Reiko (the Grass Nin and Mogoto's previous opponent) ended up the previous day. Swearing harshly and twisting one way and another, Ahiru desperately tried to find a way to cut the strings or some other way out of her predicament.

Unfortunately for Ahiru, Mogoto did not have the patience or sentiments to show her any mercy. Lifting his/her hands to each side of Mogoto's body, Mogoto tested the tightly woven strings by strumming against them as if they were guitars. The vibrations caused by Mogoto's tampering travelled all the way through the strings and eventually ended up with Ahiru.

Ahiru screamed at the intense pain when she felt her entire body literally vibrating with Mogoto's strumming actions. She could feel her bones crushing and grinding against one another; her nerves

were thrumming with agitation at the molecular vibration caused via the sound waves travelling through her. Basically, she felt like a piece of string – a toy being played with by Mogoto's skilful hands. With each strum, each vibration that travelled through her body, each spasm of pain that streaked through her spine, Ahiru felt as if she was being stretched beyond her limit and soon, she would break in the most painful of ways. Biting her lip with concentration, she finally pulled enough energy and focus in order to mutter a few words: "I... I give up..."

Shutting her eyes in shame, Ahiru could feel each wave of sting that had been woven tightly around her body slowly loosen with time and soon, she dropped down onto her hands and knees completely free of her previous imprisonment. However, she did not stand back up, whether it be because her limbs were still shaking in spasms as she recovered slowly from Mogoto's last attack or whether her pride had been dealt a severe blow, she didn't know and neither did she want to analyse. Biting her lip until it bled, she tried to convince herself that the stinging sensation from her eyes were not tears, just some dust that had somehow irritated her eyes. She could not find the courage to stand up on her legs; she could not find the strength to once again lift her head in pride. She completely ignored the calm and slow steps of Mogoto as he passed her, intending to fight against the other two combatants in this match.

*/ God damn it! / Ahiru thought to herself. / God damn it! GOD DAMN IT! **GOD DAMN IT!** / She cursed herself again and again. / I... I **hate** feeling **weak** .../ Those were her final thoughts (13) as she was slowly lifted and then carried away from the arena by one of the Gate Guardians. She was so deep in her depression that Ahiru didn't even notice the look of concern that passed through Koushiro's face as he gently took her away from the battle grounds.*

Neji slumped to the ground in exhaustion. */ Damn! That fight took more out of me than I expected. /* Glancing at the unconscious boy beside him, whose head seem to be bleeding from an open wound,

Neji couldn't help but feel triumphant, even though he did cause his opponent a head injury that may result in future mental disability. But at the moment, he just didn't care. */ I did it. I mean a person whose style seems to be directed at completely obliterating the Hyuuga Jyuuken. I avenged Hinata-sama. I won. /* His euphoria was drained away however when he noticed the Sound Nin – Mogoto – walking towards him with a swarm of weaving and swirling strings behind him/her.

/ Ug... I don't think I have anything left. Oh well, at least I beat the shxt out of Bado . Damn it! It's just too troublesome ./ Neji thought to himself in a frustrated manner, before making a decision. Lifting his hand into the air, he resigned himself to defeat. "I give up." With that said, Neji dragged himself to his feet and staggered away from the arena, not even taking a peak at the Sound Nin whom had stopped moving towards him the moment he spoke.

Soon, Mogoto recalled his/her strings back into the Gengakki instrument still strapped onto his/her back and started following in Neji's footsteps towards the 10 Gate Guardians to be looked over for injuries. Behind Mogoto, Kaga announced in a loud voice: "Winner of Match three, Gengakku Mogoto!"

"Now, is anyone interested in taking any of the current examinees up as an apprentice?" Kaga called out once more, and was again surprised by an answered call a few seconds later.

"I wish to invite Rensa Ahiru as an apprentice." A rather large, muscled man spoke up from the audience stands.

Kaga nodded again in agreement. "As you wish, Kataichi-sama(14). Is there anyone else interested in taking either of the three participating combatants?" Kaga asked once more but no one replied this time. "So be it. Now, will the next match's combatants please make your way down to the arena so that we may start the next match?"

To be continued.

(1) Originally, I didn't want to employ duel fights (4 people fighting at the same time) but after writing Chapter 29, I got too tired of writing so many fight scenes for different characters. So I'm hoping that by clumping the fights together, it'll be less work for ME. As you can see, what use to be 14 battle scenes have now been reduced to just 7. Hopefully, I can do these 7 larger fights justice. On another note, these fights suddenly remind me of Yu-gi-oh, there was one section of the Yu-gi-oh story line where instead of two dualists, there were four fighting for ranks. I'll do my best to capture that sort of intense competition.

(2) The four legendary animals of Japan – Seiryu (Dragon), Byakko (Tiger), Suzaku (Phoenix) and Genbu (Turtle). These four gods are assigned to protect the four directions: East, West, South and North. In legend, they divide the 28 constellations of the heaven into four groups of seven that they each influence. If you must know, I got this info from the official art book of Fushigi Yugi .

(3) For those who don't understand what I'm talking about. Kei usually activates and maintain a Genjutsu on his own body constantly through out a battle in order to disorientate his opponent as well as to create an opening for himself to win. However, since Genjutsu doesn't really affect Shino as much, I'm scrapping all the Genjutsu from this fight and concentrating on Kei's other great ability – sealing notes. For more information, please read Kei's character profile on my website, you can find the links through my author's profile page.

(4) Now, here's some insight into Kageru's personality.

(5) This bit is inspired by the cannon battle between Deidara and Gaara. I realised when I read that part that continual assaults on Gaara's defences can weaken it severely to the point of it dissolving all on its own.

(6) I KNOW I haven't been focussing much on Naruto at all. And I'm sorry about that. But you're just gonna have to be patient. I can't focus on Naruto until I get all these fights out of the way! Which will be another 2 or 3 chapters at least.

(7) Think of all those Fire Magicians who blow out alcohol from their mouths onto a stick with flames.

(8) Umi Kaiba – Umi translates to 'Ocean' (similar to Umino Iruka – Dolphin of the Ocean); Kaiba translates to 'Sea Horse'. She is Mishizu's mother, a native of the Hidden Mist Village, and sister to one of the 7 Swordsman of the Mist – Shinji. She's an original character I completely made up, but she won't be that important to the plot so you can ignore her presence.

(9) This is how I'm gonna depict Bado's style of fighting. Originally, the concept of Bado (as an original character) was that he was a ruthless, arrogant and annoying ninja relying on mostly offensive attacks and has a vendetta against Hyuuga Clan members specifically. But I wanted more depth with Bado, so I'm gonna switch his style to what I want him to be.

(10) I have to give credit where credit is due. This idea of Bado hovering on his feet were originally conceptualised by the characters' creator – Hitomi no Ryu (please thank her everyone). However, the way I describe it using a 'chakra field' was inspired by another Naruto fanfiction – " The Dichotomy of Kazama Naruto " by Thundereaper. Please give all credit to this author.

(11) This is an original jutsu used by Naruto during the first arc – Faith in Humanity . He used it against Neji during the Konoha Chuunin Exams.

(12) This term is what Jiroubu yelled out when he performed the same move as I had described used by Ahiru. I have no idea what the term means or what it translate to in English. Just to let you all know where the reference had came from.

(13) I thought I should take this opportunity to show a bit more depth into Ahiru's personality and psyche, hope you like how I had portrayed her. Sure, she's a tough bitch, but she also have a lot of pride in herself and her abilities. A proud Shinobi - that's how I wanted to portray Ahiru; not just a ditzy ninja-wanna-be.

(14) Kaito Kataichi – Tori's dad and the current clan head of the Kataichi family. He specialises in earth based Justus and manipulation. He's not really important so you can forget about his presence from here on out.

Phew, that's three matches out of the way, and four more to go. Hope you guys like this chapter, and please remember to read and review.

Exam 2nd Stage Day 2 Duel Fights 2

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Thirty-one: 2nd Exam Day Two Duel Fights II

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** */ Thoughts I*, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (**Author's interruptions**)

Warning: I'm finishing off the 2nd day's fights in this chapter. Hmm, I'll to add a bit of humour in this one.

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 31

(MATCH 4)

Once again, four new exam participants found themselves standing before the four corners of the battle arena; Kiba and Akamaru in front of the Turtle statue, Asahi in front of the Dragon statue, Tsubame in

front of the Tiger statue and lastely, Kawasaki Reiko (the female Grass Nin) in front of the Phoenix statue. "Match four, between Inuzuka Kiba, Kawasaki Reiko, Jikizuka Tsubame and Sakeyama Asahi. BEGIN!"

"Let's go Akamaru!" Kiba yelled as he shot a soldier's pill into his faithful dog companion's open mouth. Akamaru barked in agreement, having consumed the red soldier pill, its fur soon turned a wild red in colour. Jumping upon his master's back in a crouched position, Kiba quickly performed one of his favourite Jutsu. "Juujuu bunshin! Gatsuuga!" Kiba and the other Kiba clone (Akamaru) launched themselves towards their other opponent with no hassle or fanfare.

Reiko dodged one of the drills as they approached her while the other drilling Kiba clone went after Asahi. Knowing instinctively that his 6 foot pole will do little damage against Kiba's assault, Asahi also jumped back from the attack. The Kiba that had barely missed Reiko's form decided to continue his charge towards Tsubame instead. Unlike the other two combatants who opted to dodge or avoid the strikes, Tsubame decided to face it head on.

From her ninja pouch, she pulled out two large metallic balls, not dissimilar to the ones she used in yesterday's matches. Using her bloodline limit ability she had the two metallic balls shatter into tiny versions of themselves. The hundreds of smaller balls then thinned and lengthened themselves to form hundreds of metallic strings. Crisscrossing the hundreds of strings together with mental hands, Tsubame quickly created a thick metallic mesh net directly in front of her, forming a defensive shield to protect her from Kiba's Gatsuga.

As the Kiba clone rammed himself into the metallic mesh, Tsubame quickly had the net collapse around the dog boy, capturing and immobilising him all at the same time. Squeezing the net captured boy somewhat, Tsubame neutralised Kiba's rotation and eventually, the boy had no choice but to drop the gatsuuga. And in that instant of releasing his Jutsu, the Kiba clone exploded into smoke and

revealed a rather exhausted Akamaru, completely trapped within Tsubame's special mesh net.

"AKAMARU!" The real Kiba yelled in anxiousness as he watched his beloved companion captured by enemy hands. However, in that instant of inattentiveness, Reiko suddenly appeared behind the boy and sliced with her twin short knives before dropping back into a defensive stance once more, grinning for all her worth.

Less than a second later, Kiba's pants and underwear dropped onto the ground.

Silence reigned for some time...

Face red with embarrassment, Kiba quickly pulled his pants back up his hairy legs, trying his best to ignore the bugged eyed, opened mouth look on Tsubame face as well as the jaw-hanging, eye-twitching look Asahi was throwing his way. And let's not forget the tense silence and surprised looks shot towards him from the audience viewers. Even Akamaru and Kaga were speechless – the former frozen in shock and the later rubbing at his eyes as if to ward away the previous image.

Puffing his cheeks further with embarrassment and anger, Kiba pointed an accusing finger at the grinning Reiko. " **WHAT THE FXXK WAS THAT!!!???** "

Reiko just smirked even more and shrugged. "What can I say? You've got a cute little tuss on ya, boyo. Very pink and perky!"

Suffice to say, there were several calls and exclamations from the audiences shouting out comments like "Oh my eyes, my EYES!", "I'm blind, blind I tell you!", "Please erase that image from my head, anything to get rid of it", others were in outrage: " **PERVERT!!!** "

"WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR PROBLEM!?" Kiba was afraid that his face may retain this permanent hue of red for the rest of his life. He was gripping his torn belt and pants with an iron grip, and was

wishing with all his might that he had brought along a second pair of pants some where or even a second pair of belts.

"Aw, is little boyo embarrassed? You shouldn't be. As I said, you're butt pretty cute for a little boy." Reiko taunted before suddenly brightening up. "You wanna see mine?" She asked in a seductive tone of voice, before suddenly turning around and lifting her very short, very tight skirt up even higher in order to present Kiba with a full on view of her bikini clan butt.

The vision burned itself into Kiba's retina. Those perfectly round globes, tanned and healthy, looking so firm and inviting. He could almost hear the angels singing in the background, "Halleluiah! Halleluiah!" they were singing. Less than a second later, Kiba was thrown backwards by a massive blast of blood flowing out freely from his nose (1). Landing several metres away and tumbling around the dirt some more, Kiba lost his grip on his pants and the poor article of clothing went flying into the air without notice, leaving the Inuzuka naked from his waist down. Luckily for him though, he was completely unconscious after his blood lost, even though you could see his toes twitch slightly from time to time informing everyone that at least he was alive.

Now, back to the three combatants that was still conscious. Reiko had dropped her skirt once more and was looking rather disappointed at Kiba's naked and unconscious form. "Damn. And here I was hoping that he could take a bit more than that. I was planning on him being able to at least wait until I opened my shirt and let him touch a boob or two." Reiko muttered under her breath. "Eh. Kids these days, not tolerance what's so ever?" Reiko spoke once more before she was forced to duck under a dangerous looking, metallic spear held by Tsubame, who had thrust it forward in the hope of skewering Reiko through the neck.

Tsubame was uncharacteristically red in the face. Her cheeks were puffed more than normal, and her eye brows twitched with suppressed irritation. "How could you *DO* that? Have you no female PRIDE!" Tsubame yelled as she used her spear to thrust a few more

times towards Reiko, before changing her mind and shifting her spear's form into a scythe and once again tried to impale her opponent. However, Reiko was simply too fast and flexible, dodging all of Tsubame's attempts and managing to counter with a few knife swipes of her own. Concentrating her bloodline limit, Tsubame was surprised when she couldn't take control of the short knives held by Reiko.

"Surprised?" Reiko commented as she cut a large circular hole upon Tsubame's black sweatpants, right over where her left butt cheeks where. Flushing at the feel of air upon her exposed flesh, Tsubame increased her assaults towards the crafty greed haired girl before. Wanting to irritate her opponent even more, Reiko decided to throw some secrets out in order to distract Tsubame. "My knives aren't made out of pure metal. They're made from a multitude of alloys and mineral substances - namely ebony - that is embedded through out its structure. It only looks metal due to the aluminium coating it has. As such, you can't control it with your pretty bloodline limit, girly girl." Reiko continued to taunt.

Tsubame tensed slightly at the revelation that she was pretty much forced to use her own abilities against an opponent whose weapons she couldn't take advantage of. In that split second of indecision, Reiko was ready to continue her attack. "Kogatana Buto! (Dance of short blades)" Within one second, Reiko had performed 5 slashes with her beloved blades, revealing large cuts upon Tsubame's thighs, arms, back and one directly down her chest slicing her tube top in half.

Immediately realising that her shirt was cut in half and was about to reveal her breasts to the entire world to see, Tsubame quickly jumped backwards away from the dangerous girl and gripped tightly on to her jacket in order to cover over his chest area. She could literally feel the strip of her tube top slip off her chest and fall onto the ground behind her. Glaring for all her worth, Tsubame had no choice but to somehow tie her short jacket together in order to cover her delicate visage.

All through out Tsubame's actions, Reiko simply grinned maniacally, eyes glued to the exposed areas where Tsubame's jacket was unable to hide her skin and revealing smooth and delicate looking flesh. "Yeah, now that's what I'm talking about." Reiko licked her lips in anticipation. "Smooth and creamy; just the way I like it! (2)" An unhealthy gleam came into Reiko's eyes, while Tsubame shivered, feeling like a mouse trapped between a corner and a large hungry cat.

Biting her lip slightly, Tsubame's face burned with red-hot fury. "Are you a LESBIAN!? Or just a PERVERT!!!???"

Reiko shook her head in denial. "I'm not just a pervert." Pushing her own shirt's zip down lower and exposing more of her chest outward in full display, hands moving back onto her hips, Reiko exclaimed loudly for all to hear. "I aspire to become a **SUPER PERVERT!** Like my idol, Jiraiya-sama!!!" Claspings her hands together, everyone could literally see the love heart shaped eyes upon her face and you couldn't help but shiver at her insanity.

Standing far, far away from the two prissy girls, Asahi had his back towards them and was doing his best to ignore the sounds of clothes being ripped apart as well as Reiko's latest comments. His imaginations were going overboard with what he 'thought' the two girls would look like in their new cloths-ripped forms. He DID NOT need to confirm it with his eyes. In fact, he felt rather sorry for Kaga, who had no choice BUT to watch the cat fight since he's the one that has to declare one of them the winner.

Back to the two girls, Tsubame had had enough. She could not stand the lunacy of the girl before her anymore and had decided to end it with one final act. "That's it! You're going DOWN!" Lifting her hands outward with full concentration, Tsubame called forth as much of her chakra as possible with her bloodline limit ability. Akamaru had been released from his prison within the iron mesh net some time ago, and the metallic summoned weapon returned once more to Tsubame. "Go!" The iron mesh net transformed once more into hundreds of small metallic balls. The metal balls flew towards Reiko

with such speed and vengeance, the grass Nin found it difficult to dodge or block them with her two small knives. Tsubame then upped the tension a bit by releasing hundreds of thin metallic strings once more in the hope of catching Reiko's moving form, similar to the way she had captured Ino yesterday.

And, as luck would have it, Tsubame eventually succeeded in her capture of Reiko. Grinning rather cruelly herself, Tsubame gloated rather self-assuredly. "Looks like I've got you now!"

Glancing over her trapped form, Reiko couldn't help but groan. "Ah hell, not stringed up again. Don't you have any imagination? Maybe you could strip me or something, that'll at least give people something to look at." Reiko rebutted in a rather childish manner, but Tsubame completely ignored the older girl's taunted, as she confidently walked right up to Reiko's trapped form and smashed a tight fist into her face, knocking the Grass Nin out in one full punch.

Dropping the unconscious girl back roughly onto the ground, Tsubame glared rather hostilely at her last opponent. "Well, looks like you're the only one left." She snorted rather harshly, completely put off from her normally calm and confident manner.

Finally turning around and eyeing Tsubame rather wearily, Asahi eventually decided that with the dangerously perverted girl out of the combat for the moment, he would be able to return to concentrate on the match. It wasn't that he found Tsubame an unworthy opponent; no, he too was just rather put off from the whole fight. Truthfully, he was very uncomfortable in the presence of Reiko and her perverted mannerisms. Not that he didn't have sexual thoughts (obviously he does, he's a teenage boy after all); but when you grow up in a drunken fest family, 'accidents' happen. Hell, his own sister was a result of an 'accident' between his drunken father and someone he had never met before. Suffice to say, Asahi had promised himself a long time ago to do his best in order to protect his own fidelity, as he sincerely valued the importance of proper relationships, and did not view such perverseness as acceptable behaviour.

Now, back on track, the combatants faced each other once more. Unfortunately for Tsubame, she knew that after her tryst with Reiko, she was rather low on chakra, which meant that she had a higher possibility of losing. But that wouldn't stop her from performing to her best. Asahi, knowing that he had the advantage in this last fight, also felt rather annoyed at the situation. He would have much rather preferred to fight someone on equal terms (3). Nonetheless, the match must go on.

Standing straight, Asahi called out to his opponent. "Let's make this last assault count, put our all into it and see who comes out the victor. If my last technique cannot beat you, I'll surrender." Tsubame was initially surprised and sceptical about Asahi's motives but eventually nodded to the suggestion.

As if a silent bell had been rung, both combatants flung away from each other to ready their final attacks. Asahi pulled out a wooden block with an ukiyo-e caricature designed onto its surface. Pulling a brush out of nowhere, he quickly dabbed in his name onto the wooden block. Instantly following that, Asahi performed a series of hand seals before slamming both his palms and the ukiyo-e wooden block onto the ground "Ukiyo-e Shokan no Jutsu! (Ukiyo-e Art Technique)" A sudden burst of smoke clouds covered Asahi's form and when the dust finally cleared, most of the audience's mouths were hanging open as what looked to be a larger than life size, three-dimensional Ukiyo-e art figurine was revealed. The caricature was fully three-dimensional, dressed in traditional samurai garb with helmet, arm guards, leg guards, full body armour, three swords strapped to his side and even a flag on a bamboo pole strapped behind him. From beneath the traditional out curved samurai helmet, a strange, almost flat face could be seen with tiny lines of moustache drawn above his lips and a small beard upon his chin, small beady eyes and short, upturned eyebrows. The entire thing looked surreal in a '2-dimensional picture turned 3-dimensional animation' feel.

Even Tsubame was shocked at Asahi's strange summon.

Hell, up in the stands, even Saporo (Asahi's own sister) was shocked at his new summon. Not that it was general knowledge or anything, but due to Asahi's strange allergy against anything alcoholic (the Sakeyama family's pride and joy), he had always been seen as a bit of a disappointment by his own relatives. He wasn't subjugated or treated badly, but there was always an air of disappointment rather than disapproval surrounding him. As such, he had been forbidden to sign the Sakeyama traditional summoning scroll – which is the summoning for cats. To watch now as Asahi had somehow overcome that obstacle and created his own summoning technique, Saporo was more than ecstatic for her brother. She was overjoyed and could not help but scream out at the top of her voice. "Wicked looking thing, BRO!!!"

Back on the arena, Asahi's eyebrow twitched as he heard his sister's exclamation. "What do you mean 'wicked looking'?" He snapped back in irritation. "Are you saying he looks angry, evil-looking or just plain constipated?!" Unable to decipher if his sister's words were suppose to be encouraging or discouraging, Asahi simply pushed the thoughts back to the back of his mind and concentrated fully on the fight at hand.

"Alright, Ukiyo-e summon, attack with all your force!" The newly summoned samurai rushed towards Tsubame's unprepared form. Throwing a couple of kunai from her pouch, the metallic weapons were all deflected by Asahi's summoned samurai's sword.

Jumping back for more distance, Tsubame called up all of her chakra into one final, concentrated attack and started performing the last set of seals for this match. "Hijutsu: Sensatsu Kinshou! (Special Jutsu: Flying metal needles)" Her metal orbs (that were still floating into the air) shattered into thousands of infinitely small needles, all completely surrounding upon the rampaging samurai coming her way (4). "Go!"

In a flash, the tiny needles pierced the samurai all over its body, resulting in the summon looking more like a porcupine instead of a humanoid figure. Luckily for Tsubame, a few of her needles actually

pierced the only weak spot upon the samurai's body – namely, the back of the knee where a small crest of Asahi's name was printed on it. As such, the samurai summon, weakened extensively by Tsubame's assault, burst into a cloud of smoke.

However, before Tsubame could start congratulating herself, she suddenly collapsed into unconsciousness. Behind her stood Asahi who still had his hand forward where her neck had once been. He had sneaked up on Tsubame when she was preoccupied with his latest summon and had taken the chance to knock her unconscious. Of course, having used up almost all of her own body's chakra, she would have fell into unconsciousness sooner or later, Asahi was merely accelerating the process.

"Jikizuka Tsubame is unable to battle. Victory goes to Sakeyama Asahi!" Kaga announced as he dropped the Kage Kekai, and some members of the Gate Guardians had come to carry the comatose form of Tsubame away from the arena while Asahi slowly stepped away, without a single scratch on his body. "Now, is anyone interested in taking any of the current examinees up as an apprentice?" Kaga called out once more, and was surprised that he was answered almost immediately.

"I'd like to take Sakeyama Asahi as an apprentice, Kaga-san." A tall, thin man with pure white hair and long blue-gray robes spoke up from the audience stands. Kaga lifted his eyes in surprise but nodded in acquisition. Behind him, Asahi was also surprised, since he didn't think he had preformed that much during this match at all; however he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. As such, the young Cloud Nin simply shuffled his way towards his new master/teacher.

Kaga nodded again in agreement. "As you wish, Raitei-sama(8). Now, will the next match's combatants please make your way down to the arena so that we may start the next match?"

xxx XXX xxxx **(MATCH 5)**

Once again, four new exam participants found themselves standing before the four corners of the battle arena; Tenten in front of the Turtle statue, Uchiha Sasuke in front of the Dragon statue, Naja Daiku in front of the Tiger statue and lastly, Asagiri Kaori (the female Grass Nin with twin black and white hair) in front of the Phoenix statue. "Match five, between Tenten, Uchiha Sasuke, Naja Daiku and Asagiri Kaori. BEGIN!" Kaga announced in a loud voice.

Pulling several kunai from her pouch, Tenten immediately flung them towards the vicinity of her three opponents. Sasuke managed to block her weapons with his own kunai while Daiku simply jumped out of the way, and Kaori used her hair manipulation in order to repel the attack. Surprisingly, none of Tenten's kunai managed to cut her delicate hair as if the fine strands were enforced with chakra itself.

Pulling out a weapon summoning scroll, Tenten quickly called forth her weapon of choice, this time revealing a large claymore (5), pristine in its smooth metallic surface and vibrant in its reflection of all light. Tenten handled the large sword as if it weighed nothing on her slim form. Her actions were smooth and methodical in its precision. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that she was just as proficient in its usage as she was in kunai and shuriken.

Not in the least intimidated by Tenten and her large sword, Sasuke turned his attention to his perceived main rival, namely the Ice Nin Naja Daiku. "Katon: Gokakyuu no Jutsu! (Fire Element: Grand Fireball Technique)" Sasuke released a large ball of flaming magma directly towards Daiku.

The Snow Ninja counteracted by summoning forth an ice wall from the residue of Echiko's mist to protect himself. "Hyouroro no Jutsu! (Ice Wall Technique)" Unfortunately for Daiku though, there wasn't much water vapour in the air for him to work with, and he knew he didn't have a large enough chakra capacity to manifest the water particles necessary for his jutsu.

Pulling out from his back pouch a few kunai with ice bombs attached to them, Daiku threw them towards random areas through out the

arena. He knew he would need to use an external source of water for his ice techniques and these ice bombs were perfect for him to manipulate. Once the massive spikes from his hand held bombs erupted into a multitude of explosions and deadly ice shards, Daiku quickly performed a set of familiar hand seals. "Fubuki no Jutsu (Snowstorm Technique)" He whispered beneath his breath as the ice shards quickly disintegrated into tiny particles and reformed itself into beautiful snow flakes floating around the arena, not dissimilar to what Hikon had done previously in her match.

However, unlike Hikon's Genjutsu technique which renders her opponents into a deep sleep; Daiku merely used his technique as a substitution to the Kirigakure no Jutsu (Hidden Mist Technique). Basically, all he had wanted to do in the first place was to obstruct the view of his opponents.

The snowstorm that now filled the entire arena didn't affect Sasuke as much as the others due to his Sharingan eyes, which enabled him sharper vision and focus. Tenten too, had closed her eyes in concentration, placing her faith in her other senses and her instincts. On the opposite corner, Kaori had simply lengthened her hair and enforced with chakra waving about around her body, creating a reflexive defence if anyone targeted her specifically.

"Che. This little snow storm won't save you. Katon: Neppa no Jutsu (Heat Wave Technique)!" Sasuke released a surge of heat wave from his lips, enough to evaporate Daiku's much needed ice and snow.

With the arena cleared of obstructing debris once more, Sasuke suddenly tensed as he felt a presence behind him. "Hyoken! (Ice Fist)!" Sasuke jumped upwards in the nick of time to avoid Daiku's ice punch, before somersaulting forward and landing gracefully. Throwing a chakra enhanced kunai towards Daiku's position, the Snow Nin barely managed to dodge the kunai before it blasted a small crater directly behind him (6). The two boys then got into a series of Taijutsu matches. Daiku with his Hyoken style of fighting preferred to act defensive – blocking, dodging and feinting all of

Sasuke's kicks, punches, knees and elbows; before striking back with a pinpoint accurate assault of his own. At the same time, Sasuke, using his Sharingan, also played cautiously, not wanting to get caught by Daiku's dangerous hands lest his limbs were frozen by frost bite.

The two boys waved in and out of each other's danger zones, routinely jumping back when they couldn't block a dangerous strike towards their bodies, before launching back in for close hand combat.

While the two boys were busy with one another, Tenten and Kaori were not idle in their fights either. Tenten swung her large Claymore at Kaori continuously, each time getting closer and closer to the bi-colour haired girl, leaving Kaori no room to stop for a breath let alone concentrate on performing jutsus. For the first time in a long time, Kaori was rendered unable to fight. Due to Kaori's own personal style and her bloodline limit ability, she had always needed to stand in one unmoving spot in order to perform at her best, similar to Gaara's stance. But in this instance, that 'need' to stay unmoving is proving to be her downfall – a weakness that Tenten is capitalising on effectively.

Not wanting to lose so soon, Kaori enhanced her hair strands with Chakra once more and grabbed onto the Tenten's claymore with an iron grip. Tugging the now useless weapon to make whether or not it could be budged, Tenten twirled the claymore in an eclipse, weaving more of Kaori's hair strands around it before slamming it down onto the ground, trapping Kaori's hair as well as Tenten's own chosen weapon. Not wasting a single second, Tenten pulled out her weapons scroll once more and called out her next set of weapons, which turned out to be two identical metallic whips.

Hair still trapped upon the ground by Tenten's claymore, Kaori only had time to gasp before Tenten's whip laced towards her grappling onto both her hands, immobilising her from performing hand seals completely. Panicking at her current situation, Kaori tried to recall her

hair back or pull her hands out of Tenten's whip, but both attempts only resulted in headaches and the scrapping of skin upon her wrists.

"Give up, or I'll use my other whip upon your face." Tenten confidently stated as she readied her second whip in her right hand, while her left hand held firmly to the other whip that had caught Kaori off guard.

See no way out of her situation, Kaori depressingly surrendered. Immediately after that, Tenten released her captive. The two girls stood on either side for a moment, before Kaori performed a bow in acceptance of her defeat. Tenten followed in her opponent's example and bowed herself, showcasing that she viewed Kaori as a worthy adversary. For formalities out of the way, Kaori quickly walked off the arena stage while Tenten turned back to the boys

"Katon: Karyuu endan!" Sasuke breathed out a giant fire dragon, scorching the ground as it made it's way towards Daiku. The panicked Snow nin had no choice but to sacrifice the last of the moisture in the air to form a wall of ice in defence.

"Hyouroro no Jutsu! (Ice Wall)" A giant slab of ice erupted from the ground before Daiku, but even that was no match for Sasuke's enhanced fire dragon. Daiku leapt away in the nick of time before he could be burnt by the giant flaming creature. Reaching back to his pouch, Daiku pulled out the last of his ice bombs in preparation for destroying Sasuke's dragon. "Hyou Bakudan! (Ice Explosion)" The ice bombs crystallised all around the giant dragon, the two opposing elements clashed in a magnificent display of power, resulting in a massive explosion that dissolved both Sasuke's Karyuu endan and the last of Daiku's ice bombs.

Breathing deeply from having used his newly learnt and (relatively speaking) best fire attack, Sasuke (even with his Sharingan eyes activated) barely had time to avoid Tenten's metallic whip as it swiped at him across the chest area. Unfortunately for Daiku, he

hadn't noticed the assaulting whip in time to avoid being caught by Tenten.

The metallic whip wrapped around Daiku's lower leg in a tight knot before the Snow Nin suddenly found himself being lifted up, twirled around in the air and then flung downwards again onto the unforgiving ground. Groaning in pain as he crawled his way out of the crater his body had created when it slammed harshly into the earth, Daiku's eyes squinted in relief that Tenten had shifted most of her attention onto the last Uchiha and not him. Regrettably, Daiku had completely used up his store of ice bombs and other means of acquiring ice and water, and without moisture for him to manipulate, he's pretty much a sitting duck as it appears. Looking to his side and gazing at the nonchalantly standing Kaga, Daiku made a decision: "Kaga-san, I'd like to surrender. I can't fight anymore."

Kagao nodded to Daiku's request and the two of them (one standing while the other lying painfully on the floor) simply gazed forward towards the last two combatants of this fight.

Throwing a kunai with an explosion tag attached, Sasuke readied himself for the upcoming blast, only to watch in slight disbelief as Tenten easily manipulated her whip to grab onto said kunai and fling it off towards another direction where it's blast radius wouldn't affect the outcome of their fight. For the first time in a long time, Sasuke was at a severe disadvantage simply because Tenten is an excellent long range fighter with her various weapons. That's not to say Tenten's bad with close hand combat either, as was a testament to her usage of the claymore (which is currently strapped to her back). With the two whips in full affect, Sasuke couldn't get anywhere near Tenten, even with his Sharingan eyes – the movement's of the whips were too distracting and too unpredictable. And if he focused all his attention onto Tenten's wrist (which is controlling both the whips), then he leave himself vulnerable to any other attack up Tenten's sleeve. Suffice to say, this was going to be tough battle.

"Katon: Housenka no Jutsu!" Once again, with the metallic whips, Tenten easily battered the smaller fireballs aside, even managing to repel the shrunken that were hiding within the fireballs, completely neutralising Sasuke's assault.

/ I've got to disable her somehow! But how!? / Sasuke thought urgently to himself. He hadn't performed very well so far, with getting poisoned before he even reached the village, failing to escape from the mental assault in the first stage of the exam, loosing in yesterday's fight against the Sound Nin. He really, desperately needed a win now more than ever. Suddenly, his mind came to an epiphany. */ That's it! /*

Watching with his Sharingan eyes, Sasuke waited for the right moment when Tenten's whip raced towards his form once more. Jumping off the ground, twisting sideways in a mid-air rotation, Sasuke quickly performed a few hand seals before grabbing onto Tenten's whip tightly. "Raikan Mahi no Jutsu! (Lightning Shock Paralysis)" The electrical charge travelled from Sasuke's hands, through Tenten's whip and into her body in a split second, shocking the surprised girl with a massive jolt before leaving her completely numb and unable to move. Leaving no chance for Tenten to escape, Sasuke took advantage of the situation by rushing forward immediately, feeling victory within his grasp.

Tilting backwards at the last minute, Sasuke slammed his feet up towards Tenten's chin, a move copied from Lee's (Tenten's team mate) own Initial Lotus move. Jumping into the air and following behind Tenten's vulnerable form. Sasuke initiated a few physical attacks upon Tenten's body before the both of them slams down onto the hard ground without mercy. "Shishi Rendan!" Sasuke concluded, breathing harshly as he looked upon Tenten's unconscious form.

"Winner of the Five Match, Uchiha Sasuke!" Kaga announced the end the match as he dissolved the Kage Kekai. Instantly, various members of the Gate Guardians rushed forward in aid to the injured and unconscious combatants, moving them towards the healing tent to be attended to. "Is there anyone interested in taking either one of

the four Chuunin Participants of Match five?" This time, the audience remained silent and in the end no one was granted an apprenticeship, leaving Sasuke and Daiku quite disappointed in themselves.

xxx XXX xxxx (**MATCH 6**)

"Match six, between Yamanaka Ino, Harate Eiji, Iwama Uzura and Hyuuga Hinata. BEGIN!" Kaga announced in a loud voice.

Uzura pulled out a series of small, human shaped paper with strange scriptures written on them. Quickly laying them on the ground, he pulled out a bunch of his own hair and sprinkled them on top of the strange paper cut outs before launching into a set of hand seals. "Origami Bunshin no Jutsu! (Origami Clone)" Clouds of smoke appeared in the arena and blocked the other genin's view of Uzura. When the clouds finally cleared, there stood before them 6 exact clones of Uzura himself, all standing with kunai in hand. Without waiting for any signal, the clones rushed off towards the other opponents - 2 clones for every genin.

Ino brandished her beloved sword in preparation for the upcoming assault. Eiji placed himself in a defensive stance using the traditional Medical Ninja Taijutsu (7), hands at the ready to perform a Chakra Scalpel and cut the clones apart.

Hinata also placed herself in a traditional Hyuuga stance with her Byakugan activated. Due to having her Byakugan activated, Hinata was the only to see the strange and unstable surges of chakra that was enveloping the clones. / *They're gonna explode!* / She thought to herself before concentrating chakra into her hands. "Hakke Kuushou! (Eight Trigrams: Vaccum Palm)". Hinata called as she released the compressed mass of chakra and air. The blast hit both clones at the same time before they erupted into a giant explosion.

Ino too, hand just managed to stab one of the clones stomach while performing a high kick into the other clone's neck when they both suddenly murmured softly to themselves "Bakuhatsu (Explode)."

Caught by surprise, Ino didn't have enough time to react as she was enveloped into the giant blast that burn and threw her some distance away.

Eiji wasn't much better, caught off by the explosion of the clones he was facing when he managed to cut them both on the arm. Suffice to say, both Eiji and Ino were severely weakened and injured by this first assault, leaving Hinata to pursue a single-hand combat against Uzura.

Eiji flinching at the pains from his broken rib, charred skin and sprained ankle, took this moment to focus healing chakra into his hands. "Chiyute no Jutsu (Healing hands)." He moved his hands slowly over all the wounded areas upon his body. As the green highlighted healing chakra passed over his skin, the surface of his skin turned slightly pink and slowly receded into their normal colour tone. Bruised muscle and sprained ligaments were also healed in such a way. Within a few seconds, Eiji was back to one hundred percent. Look over at Ino, he saw that she too was doing her best at healing herself, though she didn't have near enough stamina and experience as he did within regards to healing. "Hey. Let me help." He plotted himself down next to the blond haired girl before placing his hands on her dislocated shoulder.

At his movements, Ino flinched in pain. "Go away! I can take care of myself, I'm a healer too!" / *Or at least, I know some healing jutsu!* / Ino thought to herself, not willing to let the other shinobi know of her own weaknesses.

"Are you willing to set your own shoulders by yourself, it's gonna hurt like hell." Eiji commented calmly even while he gripped her shoulder with one hand and her dislocated arm with the other. "Now, remember not to bite your tongue, scream if you have to." Eiji said no more as he suddenly jerked the bone into the joint using his last words as a distraction.

Even with the distraction, Ino screamed at the top of her lungs. She could literally feel the force of the reconnection run through her body

as a flash of intense pain. After a few seconds of continued shouting, she eventually lessened the sound until only a small whimpering came forth.

Wiping some sweat away from his forehead, Eiji stood back up. "You should move that shoulder for a little while yet, let your nerves, muscles and bone rest, don't strain them." He muttered before turning his back to her. "Proctor-san, I don't think she's gonna be able to continue the match."

Kaga looked over Eiji first before shifting his attention to the angry Ino. "It's your decision, Yamanaka-san. Do you still wish to continue to battle?" He asked politely.

"Yes!" Ino answered resolutely as she stood back up on unsteady feet. Pulling out long gauze of bandages, she used both her good arm and teeth and somehow managed to strap her still stinging arm across her chest. "I'm not gonna give up because of a little pain!" She glared at all her worth towards Eiji, who seemed to frown upon her determined gaze.

"Didn't I just say you shouldn't push yourself?" Eiji narrowed his eyes in frustration. "I don't really want to hurt you."

"I'm not some cry baby that's gonna run away due to some little pain. I'll deal!" Ino snapped back angrily as she brandished her sword once more. "And anyway, I don't need two hands to be able to pierce you." She finished with a fierce gaze in her eyes.

Throwing a series of bird shaped origami paper (each with a piece of his hair attached inside of them), Uzura quickly finished his seals. "Origami Kuchiyose! (Origami Summon)" A burst of smoke later revealed a flock of lifelike birds (all with life-size features upon them) flying directly towards Hinata.

Hinata had deciphered that these Origami summons were similar to the bunshins before them, they were all made out of the same

explosive material which would explode upon impact. Not wanting to chance an injury like Ino or Eiji, Hinata prepared her best attack.

With the Byakugan still activated, before Hinata appeared the green divination symbol of the Hyuuga Jyuken style. Lifting one hand towards her lips, Hinata paused slightly before continuing to raise her hand. Once her right hand was in a vertical position, she quickly swiped it downward in a vertical cut. Raising her left hand up from her sides, she quickly swiped towards her right in a cross like fashion. Pulling both her hands down and performing the manoeuvre again, Hinata quickly builds up momentum as well as increasing her focus on her chakra. "Shugo Hakke! Rokujuu Yonshou! (Guardian of the 8 Divination seals: 64 Strikes)" With those words, she began to spin directly on the spot, shooting out thin lines of chakra from each palm. As her speed increased and her hand's motion continued, Hinata quickly created a large sphere of thing, laser like chakra lines protecting her within a 15 metre radius.

Suffice to say, Hinata's pin-point accuracy with her strikes quickly and easily destroyed the birds before they could get anywhere near her position. Releasing her jutsu and stopping the spin after all the summoned creatures were destroyed, Hinata refocused her attention on her chosen opponent, Uzura (whom at the moment was looking more and more nervous).

Uzura was starting to feel slightly panicked at seeing his best jutsu beaten so easily. And with no other Ninjutsu or Taijutsu skills up his sleeve, he was definitely in the disadvantage, fighting against a Hyuuga of all people. Pulling out a bunch of shuriken and strings from his ninja pouch, Uzura tried his best to calm down as he attached the strings with the shuriken before throwing them towards Hinata.

Seeing the shuriken's coming her way, Hinata lifted her fingers in preparation. As the shuriken flew within range of her strikes, Hinata quickly released one chakra blast after another, visibly tapping gently against the shurikens but resulting in all the weapons flying off towards different directions. A few of the strings also had explosion

notes attached to them and as Hinata watched Uzura activate the explosive notes, waiting for the telltale chakra surge, Hinata thrust both her arms forward just as the tags burst into a giant bang.

"Hakke Kuushou! (Eight Trigrams: Vaccum Palm)" The release of air sliced through the resulting explosion, forcing the entire assemble backwards towards Uzura instead of coming forward towards Hinata. Utilising the ensuing smoke and debris to her advantage, Hinata silently rushed towards where she could see Uzura staggering among the smoke and coughing. *I'll finish it with this move. I will!* Hinata beat back her indecisions, nerves and confidence issues. She was determined, she was focused and for the first time in any real fight, she felt self-assured in her victory.

"Jyuuken Hou: Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou! (Gentle Fist Style: Divinity Sixty Four strike)" Hinata yelled loudly as she finally came upon Uzura's shocked face. In that single instance, most of the Leaf ninjas that were in the audience stands perked up at the words that left her mouth.

"Two Strikes! Four Strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! Thirty two strikes! Sixty Four strikes!" The smoke clouds eventually cleared to reveal Hinata landing her last pin-point attack upon Uzura's chest, before the stone Nin stumbled backwards and then fell onto his knees, coughing and hacking as blood dribbled out of his mouth. It wasn't long before Uzura fell into unconsciousness, having all his tenketsus closed in such a forceful manner would do that to any normal genin and most chuunins.

Before the fallen form of Uzura, Hinata heaved a sigh of relief, slightly shocked at herself for actually performing the move perfectly. For so long, she had been denied due to her inability to perform that move, and suddenly she had done it. She had performed the traditional Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou that her clan was so proud of. She had been able to see the tenketsu clearly enough to perform the move. Seemingly ignoring the loud burst of cheers behind her, Hinata felt whole – as if a part of her life had returned finally (8).

On the other side of arena, the match between Ino and Eiji had dissolved into a flinging match of weapons; with such weapons as shuriken, kunai, senbon and whatever else Eiji managed to pick up and throw across towards Ino, and Ino (with one of her arms still strapped to her chest) waved her sword expertly in order to deflect all the weapons coming at her.

Overall, Ino was coming to the conclusion that her opponent was an extreme oddball. He disliked seeing her hurt and yet was throwing a melee of weapons at her. When he did manage to make a deep cut upon her body, he would stop all assaults, rush off towards her and started healing her cuts. Once done, he would go back to 'his' side of the match up and start up another barrage of weapons. No matter how much she yelled at his seemingly weird behaviour or tell him that she could 'heal herself', he had ignored her and just did whatever he wanted to. It was disturbing, it was humiliating, it was weird all at one go. */ Why do I always get stuck with weird ones? /* Ino mourned to herself mentally.

Eiji had also tried a few basic genin-level Genjutsu to see if he could force Ino to give up the match or to incapacitate her in some way. However, all attempts failed because even though Ino couldn't do hand seals at the moment; she still had enough chakra control to disrupt the rather weak Genjutsu he placed on her. After all, she had undertaken some Medical training which needed absolute control for most of their jutsu; therefore it wasn't surprising that she could manipulate her body's chakra without using hand seals (9).

Completely running out of weapons to use and knowing that his level of Genjutsu usage is pretty weak, Eiji was running out of options to end this match without hurting Ino too much. Knowing that he's have to rely on his Medical Ninjutsu in order to win this match, Eiji suddenly rushed towards Ino with his hands outstretched. Ino, surprised by Eiji's sudden attack, reacted with instinct, stabbing Eiji right through the side of his stomach. Eiji grunted in pain but ignored it in order to move forward. Eyes enlarging at the sight of the blood streaming out of Eiji's cut intestines, Ino froze in that moment of

shock at her reaction, instinctively letting go of her sword that was still stabbed into Eiji. Eiji used this second of indecision to launch a harsh and powerful punch into Ino's stomach. All the air rushed out of Ino, and after that split second of intense pain, Ino was out like a light.

Kneeling down and breathing heavily next to Ino's unconscious form, Eiji grasped onto the hilt of the sword with one hand while with the other hand, he prepared a large dose of healing chakra concentrated at where the sword had pierced his stomach. And then, he pulled the metallic weapon out slowly while focusing all his concentrating on healing the severed muscle, ligaments and blood veins in the injured arena. Suffice to say, it hurt like bloody hell, but Eiji did not have the luxury of screaming out his pain or even to lose a single moment of focus. Finally pulling the sword all the way out, Eiji focused both his hands into his stabbed wound. Luckily for him, he's always had a large amount of stamina, which is currently coming into use with him healing himself. Two long minutes passed before Eiji confirmed that he had healed the once open wound to the best of his ability. It was still tender as any injured area would be but he still had one last opponent to beat.

Rising to his feet, Eiji turned around to look at the ex-Hyuuga heiress. Both combatants stared straight ahead at one another, knowing that this match was a special match. It was match between medical ninjas; a match between two very deadly people.

As if waiting for a silent signal, the two combatants suddenly rushed towards one another, hand out and ready to strike down at the other. Hinata (with her shorter stature) ducked beneath a hand thrust from Eiji and snapped her hands forward, tapping Eiji against his still healing wound. Grimacing in pain but still holding it in, Eiji lifted his leg directly towards Hinata, aiming to kick her in the face. Hinata blocked his leg within an elbow and swung down even lower and performed a sweep kick. Eiji jumped up before using the full power of his waist and twisted himself midair until he could launch his own

Chakra no mesu (Chakra scalpel) towards Hinata's head once ahead. Hinata blocked the attempt with her left arm, sacrificing the ligament inside before using her feet (still planted on the ground) she launched herself backwards away from the dangerous teen before her.

Eiji took this time to revisit and re-heal the area Hinata had hurt with her first assault while Hinata also took this time to recover and heal the broken bone in her left arm. Both genins are traditionally defensive fighters. However, when you have two naturally defensive together in a fight, the battle itself automatically turns into an offensive match up. After a few seconds of down time, the two combatants rose back up onto their feet once more before rushing towards their enemies.

A forward strike, duck, kick, jump, dodge, sweeping kick and so forth were performed one after the other, leaving both parties rather bruised with various areas on their body sliced at, leaving a swab of tiny internal cuts and internal bleeding to appear in several places. Eiji's arm was literally littered with small spots of red blotches, indicating the areas that Hinata had successfully 'cut' him, resulting in internal bleeding from the veins and muscle tissue. Hinata too, had not fared much better, dropping onto her two broken legs (the internal bone having been cut in several areas), biting her lip in order to stop any sound of pain from escaping.

Gasping in pain and exhaustion, both genins once more took a short time out in order to heal up their current injuries. Both knew instinctively that they were running out of steam and that the next assault will end the game for them, one way or the other. Having stopped most of the internal bleeding on his arms, Eiji flexed the limb slightly to loosen it, ignoring the spasms of pain that raced up his arm. Hinata too, was dragging herself back onto her feet.

"This is gonna be the last one." Eiji muttered to his fellow Medic Nin, and Hinata nodded hesitantly. The two exhausted genins rushed towards one another for one last assault. At the last minute Hinata moved her shoulder into Eiji's strike, sacrificing her entire shoulder

socket before sweeping her feet in a rotational twist, avoiding the rest of Eiji's attacks and straightening once more when she was behind him. Ignoring the spasms of pain caused by her body moving, Hinata used her other hand and tapped (rather harshly) onto Eiji's neck, sending a sharp focus of electrical pulse right into his brain causing to shut down momentarily. Crashing straight down onto the ground, Eiji's brain restarted once more, but with that split second attack, the match was over. Eiji laid on the ground completely unconscious, his brain having short-circuited during that instant of contact between Hinata's hand and his neck, but now that his brain was working once more, he was merely asleep.

Swaying painfully on her legs, Hinata shut her eyes tightly, willing away the tears that were about to fall. Her arm felt like it was being pulled and twisted in the most gruesome of ways and she didn't think she had any more chakra left to heal herself. That is until the crowds of viewers (mostly Leaf Ninjas) jumped up in celebration of her victory in this match. "Yamanaka Ino, Harate Eiji and Iwama Uzura are unable to battle, Victory goes to Hyuuga Hinata." Kaga announced loudly but in a calm voice.

Giving a genuine smile towards Kaga, Hinata slowly dragged herself towards the healer's tent, knowing that she needed outside help in order to get her bruised body healed up once more. Behind her, Kaga had once again called for any interested party in taking either one of the four fighters up as an apprentice. But after a few minutes of waiting, no reply was returned, Kaga had simply shrugged in nonchalance and continued on with the last of the matches.

xxx XXX xxxx (**MATCH 7**)

"And the final match, Match 7, between Akimichi Chouji, Kankuro, Yakushi Suzumi and Kapasu Juro. BEGIN!" Kaga announced the last match of the day.

"Baika no Jutsu! Nikudan Sensha (Multi size technique, Meat Tank!)" Chouji performed his family's common technique and immediately started rolling over his opponents.

Kankuro jumped out of the way of the large human-sized bowling ball while releasing Karasu (Crow) and Kuroari (Black Ant) at the same time. Turning in a different direction while continuing to bowl his way through, Juro barely managed to run out of Chouji's way.

Suzumi threw a few shuriken and kunai at the rotating Chouji, all to no effect. Releasing a bell from her right earring (10), Suzumi aimed and then threw the delicate looking bell directly beneath Chouji's rotating body. The bell landed just between the ground and Chouji's front rotation, resulting in the Akimichi bouncing off the ground due to the impact of said bell striking him at just the right angle. Once in the air, Suzumi threw a kunai attached with an explosive note towards the large boy. This time, the point-black range explosion was strong enough to stop the Akimichi boy's propulsion enough to slow him down; not to mention with the additional impact of landing dizzily upon the earth, it was no wonder that Chouji fell into unconsciousness at the beginning of the match.

Now that the powerhouse of the four opponents was rendered comatose, it was rather easy for Kankuro to finish off Juro with a simple jab to his neck, knocking the boy straight into oblivion.

Picking the bell earring off the ground, Suzumi looked rather intimidated by Kankuro with both his puppets by his side. Suffice to say, she had no confidence she could win against him. "Examiner, I surrender."

Obviously, with such poor performance overall (even Kankuro was disappointed that Chouji had been taken out straight out of the bat (11) as he had been looking forward to their battle having known the Akimichi boy had taken on one of the Sound Elites and managed to survive); none of the four genins were granted an apprenticeship.

Once all the genins (injured or otherwise) were gathered together on the audience stands, Kaga and the rest of the Gate Guardians stood before them in a military fashion. Unlike yesterday when they were simply relieved of their presence in order for them to return to their

dorms to rest, today, Kaga had wanted to conclude the end of these matches with a small speech. Considering that all the matches only took up half a day, there was still enough time for Kaga's presentation, lunch and rest or even training.

"I'd like to congratulate you all on a distinct general increase in your performance today, as compared to yesterday. You have all done extremely well so far and should feel proud of your accomplishments. Your proctors continue to assess your ability and suitability for the Chuunin rank as they compile more data regarding your performances and grant you specific points that coincide with those performances. Overall, I'm highly impressed by the quality of your professionalism I've seen before me." Letting all the genins some time to bask in their glory at his praise, Kaga silently looked from one face to the next, silently giving each and everyone his own spiritual support.

"Now, on to the next bit of discussion! Tomorrow will be the last day of Stage 2 in the Kuunoki Special exam. Everyone is to attend tomorrow's session, including those that have already been granted apprenticeships. I hope to see you all bright and early standing here at the stadium once again tomorrow morning. Last but not least, can you all once again form challenged pairs and have your names registered for the last time with your chosen proctors. I congratulate you all on your performance so far and hope that you can do even better tomorrow." Kaga concluded his rather short speech with a cheerful glint in his eyes. "Once you have registered your names, you can do whatever you want for the rest of the day." This last comment brought about a few cheers from the genins before him.

Lee was ranting something about more training while a few of the more injured genins were just glad they had more time to rest and recover. A few had opted to just relax and walk around the smallish Kuunoki village, getting some fresh air and clearing their minds. Overall, it was a well deserved down time for them as they haven't had much time to themselves at all for the last few hectic days.

To be continued.

(1) Think of how Iruka reacted when Naruto first performed the Sexy no Jutsu in episode one. On a completely different note... it was so HARD and funny to write this bit. As a female in my own right, I've never written anything perverted before. I hope you appreciate the lengths I'm going to in order to please you all with the standard of this story.

(2) Um.. I have no idea why I keep on giving Reiko these weird two liners, but they seem to work and match her personality somewhat. So yeah, here's a made up quirk of Reiko's, always commenting on other people's physical appearances with short two-liners.

(3) Ehehe... I'm making Asahi out to be a real gentleman, aren't I? Oops, well, he's a good kid. That's all I really wanna say.

(4) Move inspired by Haku's own Sensatsu Suishou (Flying water needles). Just imagine Haku's move but instead, Tsubame uses metal needles formed from her metal orbs.

(5) I've recently gotten hooked on the new anime series – Claymore. Wicked anime, that one! Now, 'claymores' are large, two-handed swords used in the Medieval era. It was founded in Britain during the time of clan warfare and border fights between the English and their neighbouring kingdoms. Check out a picture of it from wikipedia, you'll know what I mean then. An average claymore is around 140 cm in overall length, with a 33 cm grip and 107 cm blade; it weighs approximately 2.5 kg.

(6) I'm going back to using chakra enhanced kunai. There are 2 ways in which to enhance a weapon. You can charge it's power (making it heavier and faster and therefore more powerful); or you can charge it's control (making it a chakra seeking, or heat seeking kunai).

(7) Just imagine Tsunade or Kabuto in their normal stance. A basic up-right position with their arms lose by their sides and knees slightly bent in readiness.

(8) For those of you wondering why I'm making such a big deal out of this, or even why I included it in the first place. It's because I wanted to develop Hinata's character. The traditional Hakke Rokujuu Yonshou move is just a symbol of what she lost a long time ago – self assurance, confidence, and pride in oneself. I believe she had been belittled for so long because she couldn't perform that move, or even see the tenketsu properly that she felt she had to overcome this obstacle in order to regain the part of her identity that relates to being a Hyuuga. She may be born a Hyuuga and may have the same eyes as a Hyuuga, but if she can't do what Hyuugas are able to do, she will always feel like an outcast, like failure. With this situation added into the plot, not only does she have a new move up her sleeve, she regains much of her confidence back and I can finally add in some NaruHina as I go along.

(9) I always believed that Ino had very good chakra control. How else had she been able to trap Sakura (in the Cannon series) with her hair without using any hand seals at all. And she only reinforced it with her feet standing on top, while she used her hands to complete the seals for Shitenshin no jutsu. That type of double concentration takes skill and latent talent.

(10) Suzumi's bell earrings are special in that they are created from a strong metal alloy and allow for Suzumi to pulse her chakra threw them, enhancing the sound affects and illusionary impacts whenever Suzumi used them for her techniques.

(11) I'm sorry Chouji Fans, for making Chouji look so weak. He just never strikes me as the type to do very well under pressure, especially where there's an audience waiting to judge him on his performance. He's always struck me as an impulsive type (hehe, blame it on the 'fatty' comments) so that's how I portray him in this story.

The last half of this chapter was rather boring I think; mainly because I've run out of inspiration regarding fight scenes. So, next chapter, there should be very little fights scenes as I'm completely out of ideas. The next chapter should be out soon. I had it almost finished

even before this chapter. I like the next chapter, I hope you do too.
Stay tune and remember to review!

Just to recap what's been happening, here's a basic summary of the results of various fights:

Match 1: (Sand) Gaara Vs (Sound) Sasayaki Kageru Vs (Grass) Midou Kei Vs (Leaf) Aburame Shino - winner **Gaara**

Match 2: (Snow) Gojou Hikon Vs (Mist) Harate Echiko Vs (Leaf) Rock Lee Vs (Cloud) Sakeyama Saporu - winner **Hikon**

Match 3: (Stone) Rensa Ahiru Vs (Sound) Gengakku Mogoto Vs (Leaf) Hyuuga Neji Vs (Cloud) Waisa Bado - winner **Mogoto**

Match 4: (Leaf) Inuzuka Kiba Vs (Grass) Kawasaki Reiko Vs (Stone) Jikizuka Tsubame Vs (Cloud) Sakeyama Asahi - winner **Asahi**

Match 5: (Leaf) Uchiha Sasuke Vs (Snow) Naja Daiku Vs (Leaf) Tenten Vs (Grass) Asagiri Kaori – winner **Sasuke**

Match 6: (Leaf) Yamanaka Ino Vs (Mist) Harate Eiji Vs (Stone) Iwama Uzura Vs (Leaf) Hyuuga Hinata – winner **Hinata**

Match 7: (Leaf) Akimichi Chouji Vs (Sand) Kankuro Vs (Sound) Yakushi Suzumi Vs (Mist) Kapasu Juro – winner **Kankuro**

People exempted from further fights due to invite of apprenticeship:

- (Leaf) Aburame Shino – Shinzo Yami
- (Grass) Midou Kei – Oniyoubu Jin (Yami's father)
- (Snow) Goujo Hikon – Raitei Hikari

- (Mist) Harate Echiko – Kaiba Umi (Mishizu's mother, sister to one of the 7 Swordsman of the Mist 'Shinji')
- (Stone) Rensa Ahiru – Kataichi Kaito (Tori's father)
- (Cloud) Sakeyama Asahi – Raitei Hideki (Koushiro and Hikari's father)

Exam 2nd Stage Day 3 Team Challenge

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Thirty-two: 2nd Exam Day Three – Team Challenge

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** */ Thoughts /*, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: I threw away the idea of more fight scenes out the window. I just couldn't bring myself to write more fight scenes; hence, why this chapter will be mostly dialogue. Hope you all enjoy. There'll be a bit more character development. Sorry, but this chapter will be full of jump scenes and mostly talking.

I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank the following people for supplying the Original Characters that will be showing up from here on out (yes, you know who you are): Hitomi no Ryu, Sam, Reeki Shadowstar, and Bryan Terran! Thank you all very much for the creations of the OCs, and now, they're finally mine to butcher and maim as I see fit. Hee hee! This will be fun!

Chapter 32

"Good day people! Hope you've had a good night's rest and are ready to tackle this last day's assessment." Jubei exclaimed cheerfully, once again ignoring the baleful glares sent his way by the various genins.

"Listen up. Today is officially the last day of the Chuunin Exam in which we will be assessing your performance and calculating your scores. Once these scores have been added up, the top 8 will be selected to fight in the Chuunin Exam tournament that is scheduled to occur in one month's time. You should all remember that the tournament is to be held in the neutral city of Bai Ling, on the borders of Hidden Leaf and Hidden Rain." Hikari spoke in a no-nonsense voice.

At the shocked exclamations coming from the gathering of Chuunin hopefuls before them, Koushiro had to yell at the top of his voice to be heard over the noise. "Oi! We're not finished with the explanations yet! Now, I know you're all surprised that only 8 out of the 30 participants will be participating in the final tournament. That's because no Daimyos and rich lords would want to spend an entire day waiting for the individual fights for all 30 of you to finish before a winner is announced. It's just not logistically plausible. Hence we're only gonna let the best 8 fight on the day."

"HOWEVER!" Akiko's voice raised above all others to catch their attentions. "That does not mean that for those of you who didn't get to the top 8, you will not have the chance to become Chuunin. Remember, this final tournament thing is not gonna have any impact on how we view whether or not you have the powers, knowledge and skill to become a Chuunin. It's only a formality really, and an opportunity to advertise for your respective villages. That's why **TODAY** is actually your last chance to impress us. Not only is today the last day in which you can be granted a rare apprenticeship with one of our own Shinobis, but today is also the last day in which we collect data and calculate your overall performance. After today, we'll pretty much make up our minds who we would recommend for

promotion to the Chuunin Rank." Akiko finished, and Hikari followed straight after.

"On a different note, for those of you who have already been granted an apprenticeship, this doesn't mean you'll automatically make it to the top 8 either, or even be recommended for promotion. The apprenticeship is just that, an apprenticeship in which you will be taught the arts of your various masters and given guidance to hone your own individual gifts. It has nothing to do with how much we perceive you deserve a promotion in rank. Hence, why members of the Gate Guardians – who are proctors themselves – are able to grant invites to apprenticeships as well. So keep that in mind everyone. Nothing is secure, nothing is guaranteed. Everything is up for grabs so expect the unexpected." Hikari concluded, destroying a few of the preconceptions held by a few genins thinking that an apprenticeship would automatically put them within the top 8.

"Because the Hidden Air Village is a neutral village, devoid of any particular alliances with any other villages, we cannot officially grant you the rank of Chuunin. However, we do give out recommendations as to who we believe have the capacity to become a worthy Chuunin. With those recommendations, your original villages will be able to grant you the rank in official terms." Mishizu stated in a sharp voice, back straight and arms on her side in a military fashion. "As such, there is a possibility that many of you will be granted such recommendations, more than the 8 selected participants in the tournament. On the other hand, we may only recommend less than those selected 8. In the extremes, we may not recommend anyone at all. Basically, today is your last chance to prove to us you deserve that rank, more than anything."

Pausing for a few minutes to let the noise drown out once more, Jubei and the rest of the Gate Guardians watched in silent fascination as genins before them grouped together in their various villages, quickly and sometimes loudly discussing the repercussions of such news.

Standing not too far away from the Konoha ninjas, Shikamaru sighed once more and mentally thanked every god in existence that he was granted the Chuunin rank prior to this ever troublesome exam. Beside him, Kiba was ranting, in the literal sense of the word.

"The hell!? They can't do that to us!?" Kiba fumed loudly, even Akamaru was wining in annoyance beside his master. "I mean, FXXK! Why do they always leave the important info out till the last second! Shxt! I'm gonna need a miracle, man! I hadn't been doing well so far, and the shxt is about to hit the fan. I swear if anything else goes wrong, I'm gonna blow!" The Inuzuka continued to swear under his breath, hoping that this release of profanities would help him lower his anxieties and enable him the opportunity to pull out a miracle.

Shikamaru slumped once more, irritated at Kiba's continued rant. "You're so troublesome." He managed half-heartedly. He glanced around him, gazing at the various expressions held on the faces of his friends, and felt slightly depressed that there was nothing he could do to help them.

Chouji was shuffling nervously. He didn't even pull out any of his bags of chips, which he usually did to help him control his nerves. This was not a good sign at all. Hinata was once again fidgeting and fiddling with her fingers, a habit that she had stopped at one point during the previous months. But Shikamaru guessed that the atmosphere just wasn't helping her with her confidence issues in the least. Even the ever confident Ino, whose hands are currently fisted, released, fisted again in a cycle of tension (1), showing some her agitation at the news.

Shikamaru's mind whirled in calculative contemplation. If he were to analyse all of his friend's performances, there wasn't many that had performed consistently well through out all the matches and stages of the exams held so far. Not to mention the points were gathered and granted individually prior to their first step into the village, it was hard for Shikamaru (a genius of geniuses) to hypothesise whom among his friends would be part of the 8 that was selected to join the

tournament, let alone who may have gathered enough points in order to be recommended for the Chuunin rank. And let's not forget the fact that he had no idea what type of point system Jubei and the others were working with. Were they calculating on a physical attribute level (who was stronger, faster), mental attribute level (strength of will, strength of character, previous history), knowledge attribute (level of understanding on tactics, strategy, number and type of jutsu used) or some other attribute he hadn't thought up. It was just impossible to tell, considering the head proctor of the exam seems to be Jubei, whose own mental stabilities were debatable in the first place. Groaning silently to himself, Shikamaru rubbed his forehead and try to suppress the headache that was about to erupt from thinking too much. "So troublesome." He muttered one last time, before giving up and going with the flow of things.

"Right! Can you all bring your attentions back to us now!" Koushiro called out once more, making sure that he had gained the attentions of all the genins before he proceeded with the rest of the explanations. "I'm gonna recap on every stage in which you're performance has been examined and allocated points for. First is the 2 weeks in which you made your way here to the Kuunoki no gakure no Sato. That was the first time one of us Gate Guardians acted as a group proctor in which to oversee which teams had the teamwork and capability to reaching the Hidden Air village while overcoming the various obstacles set out before them. The next stage was the mental assault from Kaga-san's Kage no Kekai in which all of you faced a part of yourself that you either didn't know about, or was afraid of – a dark part of your personality and history which you will have to overcome in order to reach your full potential as Shinobis. After that, we have the past 2 days one-on-one and duel fights in which we proctors have been keeping a close eye on your combat abilities. Now is the last stage where we will be testing your maturity and individual development with regards to Shinobi principles."

A wave of confused looks met the eyes of the proctors. Tenten was about to raise her hand in enquiry before she was interrupted by Akiko's announcement.

"Now, before you bombard us with questions, let us make this clear." The braided teenager grinned cheekily as if envisioning a private joke. "We know that you were made to believe that today you will be undergoing another set of physical battles, whether it be against multiple opponents or just one opponent, like the fights of yesterday and the day before. Well, let me tell you this now; that's not gonna happen." Her grin inevitably turned into a rather amused smirk.

Hikari took the reins of spokesperson once more. "Today, we will be putting you guys into teams of three from our random choosing. Your 'teams' will be pitted against other 'teams' to accomplish various 'missions' we've thought up. Today's test is to examine how you work in a team with relative strangers, how you react to unknown situations, how you handle surprises and about assessing your individual professional conduct. Basically, we are testing your maturity as a Shinobi. A Chuunin needs to be able to keep a level head in any situation, he or she needs to be able to act professionally and be non-biased. They need to be able to assess a situation and figure out how they go about finding a solution to the problem at hand. For today's fight only, all Chuunin participants are called to participate, including the ones that have already been granted apprenticeships." Here, she indicated the people who had arrived only a few minutes prior to her speech, namely Yuse Samure, Temari, Shino, Hikon, Sakeyama Asahi, Harate Echiko, Rensa Ahiru and Midou Kei – basically all those who have already won an apprenticeship with Kuunoki Ninjas.

"For clarification's sake, the teams were formed by mixing the challenged pairs that was recorded down from yesterday afternoon. Basically, the challenger will be on one team while the challenged will be on the opposite team. The first three listed pairs will form the first two teams, and the next three pairs will form the next two teams, and so on and so forth. For example, as recorded the first challenged pair would be Sabaku no Gaara versus Sakeyama Saporu, followed by Jikizuka Tsubame versus Tenten, and followed by Yamanaka Ino versus Asagiri Kaori. As such, Gaara, Tsubame and Ino will form one team, while Saporu, Tenten and Kaori will form

the other team." Mishizu proclaimed in a firm voice, leaving no room for question or confusion. "In regards to the apprenticed genins, who did not sign up for fights; you were all randomly placed into teams to fit the criteria."

"As you can see, we'll eventually end up with 10 mismatched teams. But that's not all people." Jubei grinned sadistically and his eyes lit up with unholy enthusiasm. "10 teams, but there's only gonna be 3 missions. So all the teams will be fighting over those 3 missions; and obviously, the teams that complete one of those 3 missions will be granted the highest points. Basically, as a newly formed team, you must decide which mission to 'take', and then complete the mission while still battling out with any other teams that will want to complete the same mission as you. Each of the 'missions' are 'retrieval missions', requiring your team to go to a certain place, overcome a particular obstacle, gather the specified item and then bringing it back to us. The challenger teams and the challenged teams CAN work on **different** missions and it's completely up to you which mission you wish to partake. There will be no register on which teams do which missions, which just means that you have no idea who your opposing teams are. So, anyone excited yet?" Jubei ducked as several deadly kunai were flung his way from the gathering of genins, who were mostly glaring at him with untold fury.

Akiko clapped loudly to collect the genin's wavering attention once more before continuing on with the rest of the explanations. "Here are the teams and their designated number!"

"Team 1, Sabaku no Gaara, Jikizuka Tsubame and Yamanaka Ino."

"Team 2, Sakeyama Saporu, Tenten and Asagiri Kaori."

"Team 3, Kankuro, Hyuuga Hinata and Rock Lee."

"Team 4, Gengakki Mogoto, Hyuuga Neji and Iwama Uzura."

"Team 5, Uchiha Sasuke, Akimichi Chouji and Kawasaki Reiko."

"Team 6, Waisa Bado, Yakushi Suzumi and Harate Eiji."

"Team 7, Inuzuka Kiba, Naja Daiku and Harate Echiko."

"Team 8, Kapasu Juro, Sasayaki Kageru and Gojou Hikon."

"Team 9, Yuse Samure, Midou Kei and Rensa Ahiru."

"Team 10, Temari, Sakeyama Asahi and Aburame Shino."

"Those are all the teams, please split up into your various 'new' teams now, and then we'll get on to explain what these 'missions' are." Jubei stretched slightly, giving time for the genins to form their various teams. He could see in the corner of his eyes that already some of the 'teams' were gonna be awkward to say the least. Considering Sasuke and Chouji were keeping at least 5 full steps away from their relatively perverted teammate Reiko. That was one VERY dysfunctional team from the very start - an Uchiha with an ego-problem, an Akimichi with a confidence-problem and a self proclaimed super pervert all on one team. Jubei couldn't wait for the exam to begin; he grinned to himself and cackled wildly, earning him some strange stare in return but he didn't care. His day was looking up with so many minds to screw around.

Once all the teams were assembled, or in team 5's case, as assembled as they could become, Jubei launched into the next part of the exam preparations. "Now, as said before, there are only 3 'missions' you can choose from. Mission 'A' is to retrieve what we call a 'Black box' from the Forbidden Tower. Mission 'B' is to retrieve the scroll on the ancient art of Elemental Bending from the old Library Chambers. And lastly, mission 'C' is to retrieve the 'golden firefly' from the Oniyoubu Forests. Any questions must be asked here and now. The 'missions' will begin in half an hour." Jubei concluded and immediately several hands shot up with enquiries; the Gate guardians fielded them all at the same time, resulting in several conversations going at the same moment (2).

"What is this Golden Firefly thing? What does it look like?"

"Where is the Library Chambers and how would we know which one is the scroll we're looking for, assuming that the Library is full of scrolls?"

"What is the black box? And can you give us any information about the Forbidden Tower? Why is it forbidden?"

"The Golden Firefly isn't exactly a firefly. In fact, it's not even an insect. It looks like strange furry ball with bat like wings and a long but thin tail that looks almost like the tail of a stingray. The fur of its body is golden in colour, hence the name."

"The black box is... as its name suggest, just a black box. It's about a foot long, a foot wide and a foot deep."

"The entrance to the Library Chambers is up on the mountain side behind us, where you can see the stairs. (3)"

"There is, on record, only one Golden Firefly left in the Oniyoubu Forest."

"What is the Oniyoubu Forest like? Can you provide any information?"

"Will there be guards in any of the three mentioned places? And if so, how many?"

"We cannot give details as to what the scroll looks likes, all we know is that it is a scroll dating several hundred years back and it includes inside of it details regarding the lost bending arts. No more information is available regarding the scroll."

"The Golden Firefly is extremely important for medical reasons, you must not harm a single hair or fur, understand?"

"Yes, there will be Librarians and guards in the Library. It's your job to find and retrieve the scroll without one of them noticing, or at least escape from them if they find out."

"Do you have ANY information regarding the black box or the Forbidden tower you can give us?"

"The forbidden tower is just the forbidden tower. No information is available regarding what is inside it. We don't know where the black box is located; we just know its inside."

"We can't give that information because we don't know."

"The Oniyoubu Forest houses a multitude of strange and wacky creatures as well as natural spirits and ghosts. You aren't allowed to harm any of the fauna or flora in there during your hunt of the Golden firefly."

"There may possibly be guards at the Forbidden Tower; no one can be sure what's in there since no one has gone in there for a long time."

"The Library will of course be full of scrolls and books and stuff. We don't know exactly where the particular scroll will be located."

"There are no guards in the Oniyoubu Forest. It's just a wild forest with mystical, spiritual and powerful creatures you've got to look out for."

"Sorry, I can't answer that."

"Don't know how many."

"You really don't know or you just don't want to tell us?!"

"The Golden Firefly is only around the size of my fist. However, don't let its size surprise you; it's a damn fast little bugger."

"Look, in real missions, there are bound to be lots of information that can't or won't be granted, depending on the situation, go with the flow and figure it out yourself when the time comes."

"PEOPLE! Time's up." Jubei's loudly proclaimed, drawing all their audience's attention to him alone. He grinned unabashed. "Okay, you've got until tonight before the full moon appears to fulfil those missions however way you can. Each of your teams will be followed by one of us proctors but we will be staying away from your sight and you can't ask us for help or any more information from this point onward. In fact, we probably won't even be on your radar. Once you've retrieved the items, bring them to Kaga-san who will be resting at the White Palace – the Uzumaki residence at the top of the Mountain. Go there and present your mission 'items' to him and he will announce whether you've got it right or not. Well, I think that's about it. Good luck! Your 'missions' start NOW!"

With Jubei's last words, all the genin teams disappeared from sight. Strangely, all the newly formed 'team' members stuck together until they landed somewhere far away to start their analysis and agonise over which mission to take, taking into consideration their various skills and levels. Suffice to say, it was going to be a long day for these genins.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 7)

"I'm good at tracking. Get me and Akamaru a scent of that thing and we can track it anywhere." Kiba proclaimed confidently and Akamaru yelped in support beside him.

"Okay, but I gotta warn ya, I'm not very use to forests of any kind. I'm a snow nin, I couldn't tell the difference between one tree and the next. So I'm gonna have to depend a lot on ya." Daiku shrugged sheepishly.

Echiko's eyes twitched at his comment. "I'm ah... I'm the same. Hidden Mist didn't really have much trees, and even if they did. Well... you wouldn't be able to see them anyway."

"So it's settled, we go for Mission C!" Kiba thrust his fist upward in decision.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 1)

"Let's do Mission B. With my Shintenshin no Jutsu (Body Mind Switch), I can take over one of the Librarians or Guards and use their bodies to find the scroll. In that case, we won't have to endanger ourselves in any way, and I can find information much easier." For the first time in a long while, Ino was exerting her leadership skills in an appropriate manner.

In reply to her statements, Gaara just nodded in acceptance.

"I've worked in my Ninja Academy and the Cloud's Library of Historical records before. I know a lot about Library systems and how they work. Go in and have a look first, return to me and tell me the outlines and I can give you a pretty accurate guess as to where such a scroll is hidden." Tsubame smiled proudly at her contribution. Mentally, she was patting herself on her back, congratulating herself for her fine work with the Ninja Academy's office back in Hidden Cloud Village (4).

xxx XXX xxx (Team 9)

"Let's do Mission A." Samure gripped in enthusiasm.

"Are you crazy? We don't know shxt about that mission. They wouldn't tell us anything except how fxxking big this stupid black box should be." Ahiru swore, shocked at her new team-mate's recklessness.

"Look. Think of it as a challenge. We don't have any idea what we're getting ourselves into; we don't know what dangers we will meet. However, that's what makes this mission more exciting. Mission C is just as comparable as the boring D rank missions you've probably performed during your early genin days. You know the ones, chasing after important people's pets and such. And Mission B is more of an infiltration mission, one of which isn't any of our specialities. I'm more of a strategic and combat person, Kei here I'm guessing is a backup/support assault person and you yourself are a front line

combatant. Our 'types' just don't fit in with stupid tracking or infiltration missions. We're an assault team and what better than to go into enemy lines with little to no information to get what we want." Samure egged both his team members on with the idea of this challenge and it wasn't long before both Midou Kei and Rensa Ahiru submitted to his manipulations. The newly formed team 9 now set off after possibly the most dangerous and unknown mission they've been given, mission A.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 3)

"I think we should do Mission B. With my Byakugan, it should be too hard to find the scroll." Hinata analysed with a non-biased tone.

Beside her, Lee frowned his eyes. "But I'm no good at finding stuff in a Library. And not to mention we're not suppose to get caught. I'm no good at those kinds of stuff."

"Yeah, you and your green spandex clad ass will stand out a mile away." Kankuro muttered under his breath in a soft voice.

"What did you say?" Lee inquired, thinking he heard something to the effect of 'green speedex clad ass.'

"Nothing!" Kankuro snapped back quickly. Coughing away the slight flush upon his face, Kankuro faced the Hyuuga once more. "I don't know. Personally, I want to take on Mission C. It'd be a synch with your Byakugan and Lee should be fast enough to catch the damn thing, no matter how fast it flies. And me with Kuroari would be able to contain. What do you say about that?" Kankuro explained his reasoning in a steady manner.

"I concur! I would like to take on a mission that I can actually do something about." Lee enthusiastically nodded in acceptance.

Obviously out voted, Hinata could only give in.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 6)

"Look! I'm the strongest, so *I'm* gonna be leader! And I say we do mission C. It should be as easy as tracking our stupid Cloud Daimyo's runaway snow rabbit!" Bado proclaimed in a loud and brash voice.

Behind him, both Eiji and Suzumi remained silent, too timid to go against the rather insane boy.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 10)

"My kikaichu bugs are tracking experts. They will lure the Golden Firefly towards us and then it'll be a simple capture task." Shino answered monotonously.

"Ah. I'll keep any other creatures away from us. I'm a wind mistress, and no way can this thing outfly me if I put my mind to it." Temari's voice and stance simply screamed confidence.

"It's a good plan. I agree." Asahi nodded in acceptance without further ado.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 4)

With his Byakugan already activated, Neji had watched in silence as Hinata's team decided to go pursue Mission C. With that in mind, Neji knew what he must do. "We should go after Mission B. My Byakugan eyes can scan the entire library for the scroll. I can even look into the details to check if they're the right ones."

Mogoto didn't speak, and his or her silence was simply taken as an agreement.

Uzura looked uneasy, slightly nervous about working with a Hyuuga and an unresponsive Sound Nin. But since he had no real protests in mind, he agreed with the proposed plans.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 2)

"We have to do Mission B! I'm great at 'borrowing' scrolls. Back in Grass, I was infamous for uh 'borrowing' scrolls without permission. I could do this in my sleep even!" Kaori jumped from one foot to the other in excitement. Just imagining how many Jutsu scrolls were in the aforementioned Library made her drool in anticipation.

Saporo and Tenten weren't so sure. But after another 10 minutes of constant badgering, they gave in to Kaori's insistence in doing Mission B.

"Yay! Beautiful scrolls, here I COME!" Kaori rushed off towards the Library entrance, leaving behind her two dazed teammates to catch up to her.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 5)

10 minutes of tense silence ensued with none of the three new members of team 5 looking at each other, let alone talking to each other.

"LOOK! If I promise not to do anything perverted to you guys, can we just put aside our crap and start work on this thing." Reiko huffed in annoyance. */ Really, they're acting like I have rabies or something! /* She snorted mentally to herself.

Sasuke simply looked constipated at the thought of working with a self-proclaimed super pervert whose dream is to become like the infamous Pervert Sannin of the Leaf. His pride couldn't take more of a blow. God, and he thought his fan girls were bad in Konoha, none of them were as 'open' as Kawasaki Reiko.

Standing behind Sasuke, almost like he was hiding, Chouji shuffled nervously from one foot to the next. He had heard stories about such perversion from his parents and was warned from a young age to 'stay away from them, no matter what the costs.' It didn't help that he had to work with one of them now. */ Oh MOM! I'm sorry, but I gotta... or else I'm gonna fail... /* He pleaded to a mental image of his mother, hoping she would understand.

Releasing a rather half-hearted sigh, Sasuke finally brought his attention back to the issue at hand. "Okay. You don't do anything – and I mean ANYTHING – perverted! No showing of unnecessary skin. No bending over, flirtatious comments, eyebrow flicking or verbal innuendos. If you can promise all that, then we can start work."

"Fine. Fine!" Reiko huffed some more, pouting cutely, not that the boys were looking at her direction anyhow. "But if we meet up with any adversaries, they automatically become my playthings. You're just gonna have to turn around if you don't want to watch." She replied snippily.

Thinking back to the 'sexy no Jutsu' Naruto had once taught Konohamaru, Sasuke finally realised the 'deadliness' of such open perversion, and how they could use that to their advantage. "Okay. Any enemies and they're yours. Unless they're girls, then maybe Chouji here can take care of them."

"Hey!" Chouji's protest was ignored.

"So, decided what we're gonna do, oh pretty boy." Reiko swayed her hips sexily as she walked a few steps forward towards the last Uchiha.

Sasuke's eyebrow twitched. "Don't call me that. And yeah, we're gonna go after Mission A."

Reiko raised an eyebrow in surprise while Chouji choked back on his own saliva. "But we don't know what kind of dangers is involved in Mission A. Hell! We don't know much at all." Again, Chouji protested, concerned for their welfare and still a little suspicious about Sasuke since his prior attempt at defection to the Sound village.

"Look at the statistics. Reiko here is probably not very good at infiltration – which is what Mission B requires, or tracking – which is the heart of Mission C. Hell, I'm not good at that stuff either and I doubt you'd be much good at it yourself, Chouji. That leaves us with

Mission A. If you look at it strategically, most of the other teams will also be pursuing Missions B and C, leaving less competition for us if we go for Mission A. It's the logical choice, if not the ONLY choice."

Finally, Chouji and Reiko conceded Sasuke's point and followed the 'leader' of their team towards their destination – the Forbidden Tower.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 8)

Hikon glared suspiciously at her new teammate, Sasayaki Kageru of the Sound. From the very first moment she had seen the snake like girl; her contempt had built to overwhelming levels. Hikon didn't have anything personally against Kageru, not exactly. But the Sound girl just LOOKS so much like Orochimaru, and even the mental mention of that hateful name brought back painful memories for Hikon. She still remembered vividly how Orochimaru manipulated and then brainwashed her own dear sister. How she was abandoned by her only family. Her sister didn't even recognise her anymore. 8 years of memories and love all wiped out in a single moment. Suffice to say, Hikon was having a very hard time pushing back her hate for the Sound Girl's look-alike in order to concentrate on the missions at hand.

On another hand, Kageru wasn't doing anything to lessen the tension between members either. The sound girl didn't care much for her teammates, she didn't care much for this mission either. She wasn't ordered to win the Chuunin Exam and with no obvious opponent before her, why should she lift a finger. After another tense moment, Kageru suddenly turned away from her teammates. "I quit. I see no point in this amateur game. Do as you wish."

Hikon's fury was about to blow, but she kept a firm lid on her building rage. Despite appearances, Hikon was actually relieved that she didn't have to work with Kageru, Chuunin exam be damned. Turning to her other teammate, Hikon snapped succinctly. "I'm gonna go after Mission B myself. You can come and help if you want. Or you

can sit this one out like *her* ." She too, turned away from her 'so-called' team and walked towards her own destination.

Indecisive, shifting from one foot to the other, Juro looked towards the cold façade of Kageru and then turned to look at the stiff shoulders of Hikon. He gulped before making his decision and following behind Hikon. / *This Snow Nin is the lesser of the Two evils.* / He thought to himself nervously. / *God. How I miss Echiko-neesan and Eiji-nii...* / Juro mourned silently.

Time passed and before anyone knew it, it was already late evening.

(Mission C)

xxx XXX xxx (Team 6)

"We're lost aren't we?" Eiji whined in tiredness.

"We ARE NOT LOST! I know exactly where we ARE!" Bado snapped back in irritation.

Suzumi signed. "Guys! We are SO lost. Look at this!" She pointed to near by tree in which on one of its slim branches hung a small delicate looking bell. "I hooked this bell up some 5 hours ago, and I'm pretty sure, we've passed this very same tree and bell at least 3 times."

"WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SO BEFORE!?" Bado scolded the tired Sound Nin.

"Shut up! You're the one never listening to us!" Eiji defended Suzumi and so another argument erupted between the members of team 6, whom had been rummaging within the Forest surrounding the Kuunoki for the past 6 to 7 hours. Ironically, Suzumi was pretty sure they weren't even *in* the Oniyoubu forests, probably just one of the practice grounds that surround the main village. Suzumi sighed once

more, completely giving up on her teammates and this mission. After wasting all this time, there was simply no way for them to win.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 7)

"I can't believe we spent all this time chasing SHADOWS!" Echiko growled in frustration.

"Oi! It's not like you're doing anything other than following me and Akamaru around!" Kiba retorted back just as grumpily. Akamaru barked in agreement.

"Well, if you would have told us before than that you're useless unless you have a fxxking scent to follow in the first place, maybe we would have chosen a different mission and MAYBE we would have been able to find our article by now!" Echiko rebuffed back just as heartily.

"Guys! GUYS! Chill people!" Daiku tried to intervene.

"Chill?! How can I possibly *chill* when I'm being led around by a freaking dog, chasing cats, birds, squirrels, even PIGS!" Echiko glared at the cheerful Snow Nin, eyes blazing with uncontrolled fury.

"They're WILD HOGS! With big ass HORNS! These aren't your normal animals and I've got nothing to work with. Of course Akamaru and I are going to chase after any unfamiliar smells. It's natural!" Kiba argued back.

"Oh yeah?! And what about that spotted moose!?" Echiko returned her ire to the dog boy.

"It could breathe FIRE!" Kiba growled back.

"And that water snake?! One would think you've never seen a snake before in your life." Echiko sniffed, her underlying message referring to the famous traitor Orochimaru.

"Its body is bigger than my waist! And it's about 30 metres long! With a 'spiked TAIL'! Tell me you've seen THAT before in the Hidden Mist!" Kiba argued back just as passionately.

"GUYS!" Finally catching the attention of his two wayward comrades, Daiku couldn't help but sigh. "We're back where we started, at the entrance from the Bamboo path." He indicated their surrounding. The two arguing genins were genuinely sheepish after discovering they had simply walked back to where they started, for a forth time. Daiku's shoulders slumped. "Hey, I don't know about you guys. But we could spend eternity cataloguing the different species of animals that live in the Oniyoubu forest; however, we just don't have that amount of time. I suggest we switch our focus to another mission before we completely run out of time. Not that we've not wasted enough as it is..." He muttered half-heartedly.

The others eventually agreed with him, however, they couldn't come to a decision as to which mission they should switch too. Kiba wanted to do Mission A while Echiko wanted Mission B. In the end, Daiku couldn't take the argumentative duo anymore and simply walked away. Even he had limits to his patience. Suffice to say, by the end of the night, team 7 didn't really accomplish much at all.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 3)

"This is all your fault." Kankuro glared accusingly at Lee.

The green clad boy looked mournfully back at the Sand Nin. "I couldn't help it. The fierce looking giant eagle was gonna kill that cute looking bunny. I just couldn't sit aside and not save the cute thing." Lee mumbled softly in reply.

"Didn't we already establish that we weren't gonna fight or **HARM ANY** of the animals in the forest? Didn't we agree that if we see anything out of the ordinary *THAT ISN'T* our prey, we **LEAVE THEM ALONE**! And tell me again, just **why** you felt it was necessary to charge and perform a Konoha Senpuu on the stupid eagle!?" Kankuro growled back in frustration.

"Because it was gonna eat the cute bunny..." Lee reiterated, having repeated his reasons at least nine or ten times by now. "I wasn't gonna harm it too much, just push it out of the way, you know?"

"You GOT US **DISQUALIFIED!!!!** " Kankuro yelled out.

"Enough!" Hinata snapped at her two teammates. "Enough. What's done is done. We are disqualified from Mission C. That does not mean we can't do the other missions. Let's refocus our efforts and go back to my original suggestion. Let's go to the Library and do our best to complete mission B." For once, Hinata's 'Hyuuga' presence demanded respect and attention. After that small bout of disputes, things settled down for Team 3 and the three genins eventually found themselves at the aforementioned Library, only to find out that Mission B had already been accomplished.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 10)

"Damn. They weren't kidding when they said that thing was fast." Temari commented, slightly out of breath as she watched the tiny thing in fascination.

The aforementioned 'thing' is none other than the only recorded Golden Firefly within the Oniyoubu Forest. It truly looked like a golden fluffy ball with strange golden, bat like wings attached to its sides and thin but long (compared to its body) devil-tipped tail (5). Hell, you couldn't see its eyes, ears or nose (if it had any) at all. How the 'thing' could see and coordinate why flying was beyond Temari's understanding. Not only was this small fur ball fast, but it has highly intense manoeuvring capability. At the speed it was going, you didn't think it could shift and swerve the way it did. But it took Temari and Shino hours to track it down and chase after it. In the end, it was only due to their perseverance and the firefly's own tiredness that eventually led to its capture. The Golden Firefly can now be found resting inside a special container of Shino's, whom often used said container to keep his collection of insects.

"Well, that was a full day's work. Good job team." Asahi felt proud to have part of the team that accomplished Mission C. Even though he hadn't played much of an active role, but he helped where he could, which was mainly as a coordinator of Shino's plans. While Shino's kikaichu bugs flamed out, found the Golden Firefly and try to lure it towards their location. Temari was the one actively in pursuit of the ever evasive animal. In the end, it was Asahi who used his own jacket to act as a makeshift net in order to capture the animal. Once caught, the Golden Firefly was carefully moved into Shino's container. Lucky for Team 10, they had also managed to avoid most of the unique species of animals that life in the Oniyoubu forest, mostly due to Shino's forewarnings via the Kikaichu insects. They hadn't even met up with any of the other competing teams, which was also a plus. Overall, Team 10 worked well as a team (newly formed or not) and managed to accomplish their given tasks.

(Mission B)

xxx XXX xxx (Team 2)

"I thought you said you could steal a scroll from the Library with your eyes closed!? So tell me why the hell are we running away from the group of Library guards?!" Tenten snapped at Kaori aggressively as the newly formed team 2 rushed from one corridor to the next, turning to their right in a tight turn. The 'Library' was nothing less than a giant catacomb maze, in which the walls and shelves were all made of stone acting both as pillars between the rough ground and the rocky roof above their heads as well as book cases for various material. Each corridor looked exactly the same with thousands upon thousands of scrolls, books, maps, legends and all sorts of archive material found on each shelf. And the worse thing is that the shelves were categorised not by the modern language, but instead by one of the ancient tongues – a written language was that passed out of existence some 5 hundred years ago, or at least Tenten thought. The strange archaic symbols were carved onto the shelves themselves, looking like random circles and dots. Overall, the entire effect just made Tenten nervous.

"I didn't think it'd be this huge!" Kaori rebuffed back hesitantly, even as she turned to her left into yet another corridor. Behind the three genins, the group of Library guards currently chasing them seemed to have grown in numbers, each shouting for the genins to 'halt and surrender'.

"Fxxk! This is getting us nowhere! Not only were we caught without having found the damn scroll in the first place, I have a dreadful feeling we're lost in this catacomb as well." Saporo replied drearily, her normally cheerful attitude diminishing after hours spent on futile searching.

"I'm sorry okay! I didn't know there was one of those Library Guards there when I pinched that scroll! Look, if you're all so worried, why not DO SOMETHING and get rid of the guards in the first place!" Kaori snapped back, this time rather put off that she was being blamed for her entire team's demise.

"I may be a Hidden Cloud Shinobi but my techniques revolve around fire, or drunken fist Taijutsu, or Neko summoning. All of which would either destroy part of the Library that we're already trapped in, or it could catch more attention than we already have on us." Saporo explained rapidly, feeling slightly depressed that she couldn't do anything in their current situation.

"And I'm a weapon's specialist. How the hell can weapons help in our situation!" Tenten retorted back as well, upping her speed and dodging a sudden hand that erupted from in another corridor to their right belonging to yet another guard that had stumbled upon their trespassing.

"Moe! I just wanna get out of here now!" Kaori cried in despair all three genins were suddenly entrapped by a giant net cast down by several Library guards from above. Trapped with no escape, the members of team 2 resigned themselves to the knowledge that they had ultimately failed in their mission.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 8)

Hikon silently moved from one corridor to the next, confident that her invisibility Genjutsu would be able to conceal her and her 'team-mate' enough to avoid detection. That is if Juro eventually stops tripping on his own feet and alerting the Library guards that something odd was going on. As if reading her mind, Juro suddenly tripped over a small rock on the ground. "Oomp" Juro undignified groan didn't help matters at all when about 5 different Library guards suddenly rushed to their section, making sure that there weren't other intruders in their sanctuary as the last batch. Hikon had quickly covered Juro's mouth, even before he could squeak in protest. The two invisible genins stayed intensely silent as the Library guards moved around them for a few minutes, inspecting every corner and shadow before finally retreating back to their original positions. Juro was about to sigh in relief when Hikon kicked his shien in warning.

With the guards finally gone, Hikon and Juro once again made their way through the maze of corridors and shelves. Every now and then, they would stop and scrounge through a few scrolls they see, but never had they come close to what they were trying to find in the first place. This tedious process was taking forever but unfortunately for the two members of team 8, they don't seem to have any other choice but to go through the scrolls one at a time, unless they capture and threaten one of the Library Guards. But from what Hikon could tell, these Library Guards were at least Chuunin level themselves. Had she not be a Genjutsu expert in her own right, they would have been found out ages.

Heaving another silent sigh, the two genins continued to trudge forward though both knew that it would take a miracle for them to stumble upon their desired artefact using such a method.

xxx XXX xxx (Team 4 & Team 1)

"I've found it." Gaara's monotone voice spoke up for the first time in many minutes.

"Eh? Found out?" Tsubame asked the rather intimidating boy. Team 1 had been travelling around in circles within the massive maze of

chambers. Ino had successfully inhibited several of the Library Guards but each time when she searched their minds for a clue as to where their desired artefact could be found, their minds were blank with recognition (6). It seems that the 'Scroll on Bending Arts' was so old or so secretive that many of the Library Guards either didn't know of its existence or they were not high ranked enough to know its whereabouts. This all meant that Team 1 was given the run around trying to find someone who did have the information regarding where they could find the damn scroll. However, so far, they weren't having much luck.

"I've found the central control room. There's bound to be someone up there that knows about the scroll." Gaara answered as he kept one eye closed with his hands constantly in a hand-seal position. Having seen Ino's unsuccessful attempts at information gathering from the various guards, Gaara had opted to help out as well. He had performed his 'Sand Eye' technique some time ago and had it travel all around the maze of corridors and shelves to see if he could locate a particular person or place that may help them in their quest. Unlike Ino, who had to release her victims after a few minutes due to exhaustion, Gaara had plenty of Chakra to spare and had had his 'Sand Eye' Jutsu constantly activated for the last 2 hours. Ino, on the other hand, had taken a soldier pill in order to keep up with the search.

"Really! Where?" Tsubame asked excitedly.

Gaara pointed down a corridor on their right and the members of Team 1 followed him in silence as they approached the centre in which they hoped they could find what they were looking for. After several minutes of quiet walking, they came to a supposed dead end. Before Tsubame could question him, Gaara had shifted his sand into the form of a hardened spear and managed to 'drill' its way through the solid rock wall. When the wall crumbled onto the ground in tumbles of rock, earth and sand, both Ino and Tsubame were shocked at the sight that greeted them. Hanging in the middle of a massive round chamber whose depths seem to go on forever with

no end in sight, was a giant Glass construction. It looked like a giant soccer ball (7) only it was made of fibreglass and what looked to be light weight metal beams supporting and holding the entire thing together. You could even see a few people inside the crystal structure. These people were different from the Library Guards.

While normal Library guards wore a strange white robe – high collared, long sleeve, knee length robe, with another white skirt beneath and a strange cone like head piece with cloth hanging from the top, sides and back, leaving only the face end revealed. Most of the Library Guards were also old looking, as if they had spent their entire lives here in the Kuunoki with most of those years inside this Library itself. However, the new Librarians inside the crystallised structure wore normal clothes – or as normal as you could get.

There were only three people inside the Glass container, one woman and two men – each of whom wore Shinobi looking pants, sandals, shirts and jackets (be they long sleeve or short sleeve).

"Wow. Looks like we've hit the jackpot huh?" Tsubame couldn't help but droll slightly as she saw the amount of computers and what looked to be high end technological discoveries being held in that single room.

"I don't get it." Ino stated in confusion. "The rest of the Library looked archaic in presentation. All rock shelves and old books, scrolls, maps and boxes. But why and how did they get *this* in the middle of this place?"

"I once heard Jubei-san say that the Kuunoki Village is a strange mix of ancient culture and modern technology. The village itself is pretty self sufficient. They don't need food or wares from other country so why trade at all. It seems as if the Kuunoki village only trade for technology. On the outside, it looks like a typical traditional Shinobi village, but inside the heart of this mountain side, you have some majestic looking infrastructure and networks. Haven't you ever wondered why there are boring, wooden water mills, but also high-end, metallic wind mills? I suspect that all the technology

accumulated in the Kuunoki are hidden and probably underground." Tsubame answered, her eyes never leaving the glass structure and people inside.

"Indeed." Gaara agreed with Tsubame's assessment as he had found it increasingly difficult to reach the 'sand' within the earth of the Kuunoki lands. At first, he had thought because he was trying to control the strange properties of earth belonging to the Raishin Mountain Range, but now he suspects that it may be the high level of metallic substances inside the earth that is actually hindering him.

"Crap! Look!" Tsubame's shout caught both Gaara and Ino's attentions immediately. Upon looking at the glass structure once again, they could see a miniature Neji, Uzura and Mogoto running up the ramp that was attached to the giant glass ball. It seems as if Team 1 had competition for the completion of Mission B. Neji and his team mates from Team 4 had also managed to find the giant glass structure, and had probably come to the same conclusion that this was the place to be. "Well! What the hell are we waiting for? We can't let them get their hands on the scroll before we do. We've got a mission to complete!" Tsubame's encouraged yell snapped Gaara and Ino out of their shock.

Gaara summoned his trusty sand once more before jumping on top it, seemingly floating in mid air. "Hop on!" He ordered his team mates, whom followed without question. Once on, team 1 flew through the air at a rapid speed, hoping to catch up to Team 4 before the scroll could be found by them. They were lucky, the three Shinobis that were in the Glass container had sensed Neji's team approaching and had rushed off to intercept them. With the members of team 4 busy fending off the Chuunin level Kuunoki Ninjas, it was easy for Gaara to manoeuvre team 1 (while still flying on his sand of course) pass the fighting and enter the glass dome without problems.

"Quick! Shut and lock the door!" Tsubame yelled out as Ino jumped down from Gaara's sand and ran towards the locking mechanism. Slamming her palm on the bright red bottom, a thick, metallic door

suddenly slid down, closing Team 1's escape out of the dome as well as shutting the dome's entrance from all other people entering.

"I've bought some time, but I don't know how long it'll hold!" Ino yelled back, her blood was pumped with adrenalin and she couldn't help but feel invincible at this moment in time. Behind her, Tsubame was already typing on the computer keyboard, looking for any reference to 'Bending Arts', but it kept on coming up blank, mainly because the 'key's upon the keyboard wasn't using normal characters.

Looking over the Stone Nin's shoulders, even Gaara couldn't help but interject (even while he reinforced the metallic door with his sand, hardening it enough to create a second concrete wall behind the door). "What are you doing? And how are you doing it?" He asked in a quiet voice, not use to being curious.

"Well, looking at this keyboard, it seems to be using the archaic characters that we've seen carved onto all the walls, floor and roofs of the Library interior. I'm assuming that this is how they categorise their items, using the old language. As for how I'm deciphering it. Well... I did a small project on ancient civilisations and their languages back when I was still a Genin at the Stone Village Academy. It seems like my short term study – which by the way earned me an 'A' (8) – will help us more now than I ever thought it could." Tsubame's confident smirk dwindled slightly as she spoke the next bit. "Not that I'm any expert or anything like that, but I can recognise a few of these characters and hopefully I should be able to find some way to make it search and find what we are looking for."

"How are you going to do that by guessing the characters?" Ino frowned slightly as she digested what Tsubame had said. For the first time in ages, Ino wished she had been more of a book worm like Sakura.

"I know a few words in the old language. For example 'Tera' means 'Earth', 'Pyro' means 'Fire' or 'Flame related' stuff, 'Hydro' means

'water related' stuff (9)." Tsubame explained as she continued to type random words into the awkward keyboard.

Standing beside her, Gaara nodded distractedly. "I remember my guardian once told me an old story, about how before the Shinobi villagers were formed, there were people who could 'bend' the elements to their will. There were four types of 'bending arts' – wind, water, earth and fire. I think at the time, they didn't think 'lightning' was one of the main elements, or something like that. But these 'bending' people died out a long time ago after a war that consumed all countries (10)."

"Indeed, I remember reading about a legend like that once. Hence why I'm typing in these specific types of elemental bending stuff as I go along... AHA! FOUND IT!" Tsubame jumped for joy as the screen suddenly lit up with a 3-dimensional map of the ENTIRE Library (which was huge by the way) with a bright, blinking red dot somewhere on the western side of the Library that was indicating where they could find the scroll.

"EXCELLENT!" Ino gave Tsubame a high five in excitement. Their previous rivalry due to the first match fights long forgotten as they found themselves working well together in an effective team environment. "Now, let's print off the map and then we can leave this place!"

"Okay. Now we just have to get out of here." Gaara muttered but even he couldn't be rid of the small smirk that was on his face.

"Right, let's go!" Ino's fist punched the air, as the members of team 1 readied themselves to punch through their adversaries on the other side of the door. "I'm gonna open the lock and door, and then Tsubame – you throw everything metallic you could at them with your bloodline limit. Gaara, you gather your sand and rush out while they're confronted by Tsubame's barrage of metallic items." Ino commanded with a fierce look on her face. Victory was so close and she wouldn't stand to lose it now.

"Ai ai! Captain!" Tsubame jokingly gave Ino a salute even while she closed her eyes in concentration, expanding her chakra outward in order to touch upon all the metallic equipment in the room. Grasping them all with her mind alone, she nodded tightly to Ino as a sign that she was ready.

Slamming her fist once more upon the red bottom, Ino quickly ran behind Gaara and Tsubame as the metallic door slid open. Just as planned, Tsubame flung object after object at the surprised Shinobis behind the door. Neji's team had disappeared some time ago, leaving behind only the three Air Shinobis to fight against Team 1. While the Air Shinobis were busy ducking and dodging Tsubame's barrage, Gaara grabbed onto both his female team mates, jumped onto his sand and immediately flew out the door, passing by the surprised Air Shinobis with little flair.

Following in the map's instructions, Gaara and his team flew through corridor after corridor, repelling any and all Library guards as they went along. This time, they were no longer concerned with keeping a low profile, they didn't care that they were now caught; all they wanted was to get the scroll, find their way out and not waste any more time if they could help it. After all, over half the day had gone by.

"It should be the next corridor on our right, on the top shelf of the fifth set." Gaara instantly turned right coming upon the next corridor, hovering upon the fifth set of shelves and looking over the contents on the top shelf. There were multiple scrolls there, ranging in size and shape. Silently the members of team 1 separated (still standing on Gaara's sand which had reformed itself into a flat plank in which they could stand on) in order to go through the scrolls at a much faster rate.

Unfortunately for Team 1, only a few seconds into their searching Gaara suddenly felt the familiar presence of three people. "Damn, Neji and his team are here. They probably followed us after we escaped with the map."

"Crap!" Ino swore under her breath. "Gaara, can you hold them off for a little longer, it won't take long, but looking for the scroll is still our top priority." She stated in a commanding tone of voice. Gaara simply nodded before he drifted down onto the ground. Looking back up, he gazed at the girls in inquiry. "Will you be okay without me or my sand?"

"We'll be fine!" Ino and Tsubame answered succinctly, standing upon one of the lower shelves in support while they continued to look through the scrolls, opening them and closing them once again when they found it was the wrong one. Taking that statement to heart, Gaara turned once more to confront the members of Team 4.

Only a few minutes after Gaara had left to delay Neji and his team, Ino and Tsubame were searching through the last of the scrolls now, that is, until they heard the sounds of running footsteps coming their way from the other corridor. "Shxt! The Library guards are here." Ino stated obviously.

Forming a determined look on her face, Tsubame jumped down from the shelf. "I'll hold off the Library Guards. When you find the scroll, holler out loudly and we'll rush back. I remembered the map showed us that there is an escape door close by, if Gaara can use his sand to get us there and out into the open, we should be able to escape fine." Without waiting for a reply, Tsubame quickly made her way towards the Library Guards, hoping that she could buy her teammates enough time to complete this mission.

"Damn it! Damn it! WHERE THE FXXK ARE YOU!?" Ino yelled in frustration and she slammed a rather large scroll against the shelving walls. She had searched through all the scrolls but the one they were looking for isn't here. / *WHY!!!* / Ino mentally yelled at herself, starting to panic. That is, until she saw another, smaller scroll hidden inside the bigger one she had just smashed against the wall. "EURIKA!" Pulling the smaller scroll out of the middle of the larger scroll, Ino looked through its contents quickly. What she found amazed her. There were pictures of people (stick figures more like) in various martial arts stances and she could see what is depicted as

'water' flowing with their stances, forming attacks and defensive moves (11). / *This is it! This is the scroll we've worked so hard to get our hands on!* / Ino thought to herself, feeling tears of relief and joy stinging upon her eyes. / *Now, I've got to get Gaara and Tsubame and then get out of here!* / Closing and then placing the delicate scroll into her Ninja pouch, Ino jumped down onto the ground before yelling out at the top of her lungs. "I've found it! Let's get out of here!"

Only a second later, Ino could see Tsubame thundering towards her from where she had been delaying the Library Guards. The Stone Nin looked a little worse for wear, small cuts and bruises all over her body, but she still looked excited and determined none the less. Gaara too, had reappeared still standing on his mould of sand. More sand suddenly rushed forward grabbed onto both Ino and Tsubame's form almost gently before pulling them towards Gaara as he turned into a different corridor while dodging both the attacks from Neji's team as well as the passing by the Library Guards that were just on their tails.

"Alright, which way?" Gaara spoke in a tight voice, showing that even he was nearing his limits.

"Right on the first corridor, right again on the third corridor then left on the second, there should be a door there, if not, just blast our way through the rock surface and we'll be out." Grinning at Ino's uncharacteristically offensive words, Gaara couldn't help but feel as if he would really enjoy her presence had they become friends. Hell, he may well put in the effort to get to know both Ino and Tsubame a lot better and form a lasting friendship with them. They reminded him a little of his sister Temari, but at the same time, they were both so different and refreshing. Suffice to say, Gaara was actually grinning when he made his way out of the mountain side, with both Ino and Tsubame by his sides.

(Mission A)

xxx XXX xxx (Team 5 and Team 9)

Members of team 5 and 9 reached the entrance of the forbidden tower around the same time, taking this moment to have an outside look at their destination. Suffice to say, they didn't know what to think, to be impressed or not. At first glance, the tower (around 8 stories tall) looked old and unkempt. The paint upon the building had faded to a light bleach colour for who knows how long, and there were many cracks and splinters all around the outer wall, clumps of plaster had also fallen from various sections (under windows) and such. Look wise, the building was ugly. However, that does not mean it was easy to invade. If you look closely enough, you would be able to see minute lines of chakra travelling and criss-crossing just beneath the surface of the building's plaster walls. These chakra strings link to a multitude of explosion notes and intricate seals.

There were two resident seal users among the members of Team 9, Samure (the Snow Ninja) and Kei (the Grass Nin) and both could simply 'feel' the hidden power placed into protecting the building. Even Sasuke, though he had limited knowledge of seals, had used his Sharingan to see underneath the underneath, to say he was shocked at the amount of defence mechanism placed into this single building was an understatement.

"So. What are we waiting for?" Reiko muttered even as she swayed her hips seductively, moving in between her new team mate – Sasuke (whom she thought was quite cute and easy to seduce) and her old team mate – Kei (who had learnt long ago to ignore her slender body).

"Yah! Let's just get in there and kick some ass!" Ahiru (from the newly formed team 9) smacked her palms together in a gleeful motion.

"Don't to so rash, Rensa-san, Reiko-chan." Kei commented, his eyes never leaving the formidable building. "It's not as easy as it looks. This building, though old and looking decrepit, still has some powerful seals stored upon its outer walls, and I can't see a way in from any of the outside windows."

"What the hell do you mean there's no way in through the windows?!" Ahiru frowned in annoyance. "You just climb the wall with chakra, reach the top – which by the way, is probably where our treasure is, and then smash our way in. Simple!"

"lie. I have to agree with Midou-san on this one." Samure interrupted, his eyebrows knotted together in thought. "The entire building's outer wall is covered with chakra absorption seals; if you try to walk up the damn building, you would have being exhausted within a few seconds. These are some of the most powerful chakra absorption seals I've ever seen. Not only that, there are electrical seals placed in various places, and explosive seals. There are even teleportation seals, Genjutsu seals and I think some invisible but weapon launching seals over all the windows. You touch something, anything, and you may not make it back alive." Samure explained in the plainest way he could, and soon, Ahiru was humbled by his description.

"He's right, but that's not all. There's also a second layer of chakra embedded some 5 inches behind the first layer of seal traps. I don't know what the hell they did that needed such a substantive amount of chakra to do it, but I'm not keen to find out." Sasuke's strong voice called out, his Sharingan activated eyes never leaving the tower for an instant. "Even the roof seemed to have hidden traps built inside it. I have to say, this really IS a 'forbidden' tower if they went to such a length in order to conceal it."

"So how do we get in then?" Chouji asked the most obvious question.

"In the most obvious way my fellow genin..." Samure muttered rather blandly. "Through the front door!"

"That's it? That's the great plan?" Reiko taunted from her end of the new teams.

"It's not that, Reiko-chan; originally, we had planned to avoid going through the inside of the tower to reach the top. That way, we can

avoid any of the traps that were placed inside. However, with the outer walls built like a fortress, it looks like we don't have a choice but to work our way through whatever is inside to get to our goal." Kei explained patiently, use to his fellow Grass Nin's impatience.

"Oh, okay." Reiko paused for a second before continuing on. "So again, what the HELL are we waiting for? An invitation!?" She snorted in an unladylike manner before stomping forward, hips still swaying dangerously from side to side. Obviously, she was the first one to reach said giant doors. She stretched her hand forward and ripped away the paper seal that had locked the large wooded doors before her, lifting a delicate looking leg and then kicking forward with massive force. The doors stood no chance and immediately slammed open by the impact of her kick.

Behind her, most of the boys' mouths were hanging open in shock (all except Kei that is).

"I didn't know anyone else had inherited Tsunade-sama's impressive strengths except for Sakura." Chouji murmured in nervousness.

Standing somewhat in front of the group, Midou Kei gave a heavy sigh. "She works out a lot." He said, as if the single comment explained everything. Looking upon the other boy's stumped faces, Kei decided to elaborate. "She says it's hard to keep a perfect figure like hers if she doesn't keep up with her 'exercise,' which I might add includes heavyweight lifting. However, she doesn't actually wear weights on her body, she just spends a large part of the day stretching in the most inappropriate manner, and lifting large numbers of weights that she had ME carry for her in a sealing scroll."

"Suck it up! We girls are just as good, if not better than you weaklings!" Ahiru growled out full of confidence, before stomping forward towards the building after Reiko's dramatic entrance.

Once all six genins entered the forbidden tower, the doors behind them suddenly closed in a loud slam, enclosing the genins in their

new dark environment. Everything within the room was shrouded in darkness, as all the windows were closed with wooden boards blocking the light from entering. The Chuunin hopefuls could also feel the bare and rusty wooden floorboards beneath their feet.

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in. If it isn't little Prince Uchiha and that fatass of an Akimichi." A sarcastic, feminine voice drawled out in ironic humour. Shadow movements beside the voice indicated that she wasn't alone.

Walking deeper into the dark room, the genin's eyes eventually adjusted to the dark interior, and what they saw surprised them.

"You!" It was Chouji's voice that rang out in shock. "You're dead! I should know, I SAW with my own eyes how Haku-san killed you!"

"Hump. Don't remind me. This is gonna be revenge on my part." The massive man stomped forward, a fiery glint filled with vengeance gleaming brightly in his eyes.

Standing beside a shocked Chouji, Sasuke's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I thought all four of you were taken out." He finally muttered while his other teammate (Reiko) simply looked at him and Chouji in confusion.

"We don't die that easily. If we did, we would have died along time ago under Orochimaru's reign." Another voice, this time male snorted out in amusement. "It's funny how we meet up once more. I didn't think I'd ever get the chance to kick your ass for the trouble we went through because of you."

"Orochimaru?" Samure spoke up for the first time. "You guys worked for Orochimaru?" He repeated again, his body tensed in preparation. Although Samure had never met nor came into contact with the infamous Sannin from Konoha, he had heard enough about the despicable man to know that anyone associated with him is bad news. After all, it was Orochimaru whom abducted and brainwashed

Hikon's older sister, so this business with Orochimaru was starting to become personal.

"Not anymore." A forth male voice rebuffed rather quickly, as if angered by the notion that they would continue to work for that snake. "No, we work for Kaga-san and the Lady Oracle now." He answered with a short explanation – which didn't really explain anything.

Sasuke's eyes narrowed even further. "What the hell do you mean you don't work for him anymore? The last time I saw the four of you, you were trying to drag me to Oto to become Orochimaru's new 'vessel'!" The last Uchiha growled lowly in a threatening manner, having not forgotten how easily he had been manipulated both by Orochimaru's words and by the curse seal which augmented his mind and thought patterns.

"Che. As if we would go back to him after we failed in retrieving you, fxxking hypocrite! That fxxking snake wouldn't forgive a single mistake and our failure would have led us to our deaths. We ain't that fxxking dense or stupid!" The first female voice rang out once more.

The four mysterious figures finally walked forward, and soon the genins were able to see their features for the first time. Tayuya (still the shortest of the four ex-Sound guards) stood arrogantly in the middle. On her right stood Kidoumaru, all six arms there and accounted for. On her left, Sakon was rubbing his nose with one pale finger, standing in a nonchalant stance; at the back of his neck, his twin brother – Ukon – leaned forward in a sleeping manner. Behind all three of them, Jiroubu revealed himself, crunching his knuckles in preparation for the eventual fight with his rival.

"Only two teams, how pitiful; we won't even break a sweat." Sakon noted with a pitying gaze.

"All the better I say." The grin on Kidoumaru's face turned into an ugly smirk.

Standing in front of them, Tayuya frowned. "Don't underestimate them." She snapped authoritatively as if she had become the new leader of the Sound four (12). "We got our asses kicked because we underestimated them the first time. We AIN'T gonna make that mistake again." Her eyes then narrowed in a threatening manner as she looked upon her three comrades. "Unless you *want* to make me angry, I suggest you all keep to the **plan** ." She snapped once more just to make her final point.

Looking forward once more, Tayuya's eyes gazed upon the slightly intimidated forms before her. "Now, Kaga-san left us instructions. Each of us will be facing off with two of you." Her thumb pointed over her shoulder towards Jiroubu. "If you manage to get pass us, you're gonna have to get pass 6 levels of illusionary hell before you can make your way up to the top level. The 8th level is where you need to go and that's also where the 'black box' is." Tayuya gave the genins a sadistic smirk. "It's our job to stop you of course but we're confined to the first level only. We can't follow you up the floors. However, once you reach the top, you're gonna have to go down again and fight your way out of here. There's a good reason why we call this tower the 'gauntlet' instead of the forbidden tower."

Bringing attention to himself for the first time, Midou Kei slowly shuffled forward to ask his questions. "Anou, sorry to interrupt but I just wanted to ask. "Why was it named the 'forbidden tower' and how come you're not able to leave the first level?"

Kidoumaru was about to snap back when Tayuya stepped on his foot and interrupted instead. "The forbidden tower is basically the prison of the Kuunoki village. In the past, it was used to house the exiled, prisoners, and captives. The massive number of wards and seals are used to keep the prisoners inside just as much as they are used to keep people out. Because of all those wards and seals, time flows slower in here than outside. You can spend weeks, months even in here while only a few hours have passed outside these walls. It drove many of the inmates insane and most deaths here are a direct result of starvation or suicide. Foodstuffs are only ever delivered to

the first floor, so the higher the level you live in, the more you starve. However, recently all the levels have had a make-over of a sort." Tayuya smirked as she paused in mid-explanation. "Each of the levels except for one and eight are now embedded with powerful Genjutsu wards and each one is controlled by a 'master seal'. To escape the Genjutsu, you luckless idiots will need to 'find' the 'master seal' and destroy it before you even get a chance to go to the next level. Welcome to the 8 realms of hell (13)." Tayuya concludes and in that instant, Kidoumaru, Sakon and Jiroubu started to move against the Genins.

Jiroubu jumped over Tayuya's still figure, a major feat considering his large size. Falling downwards, he fisted his right hand and slammed it onto the blackish wooden boards beneath, breaking them apart and rupturing a hole in the middle of the floorboards. Large dust clouds erupted from his assault, causing several of the genins to cough out loud. This however was only a distraction, as hundreds of tiny spiker webbing was launched from their left sides.

"Watch out!" Samure called just in the nick of time, giving the rest of the genins a chance to avoid being captured by the sneak attack.

Powering up and taking their own stances, the genins all split up in order to take on their own opponents in pairs - Chouji and Ahiru battling Jiroubu, Sasuke and Reiko going against Kidoumaru, leaving Kei and Samure to fight Sakon.

Jiroubu struck first with a Doton: Doryuu Dango (Earth Element: Mud Cannon Ball), a large slab of earth was seemingly ripped out of the ground before being flung at the two genins. Chouji transformed into his large sphere shape with the Baika no Jutsu (Multisize Technique) before rotating into the Nikudan Sensha (Human Cannon Ball). He managed to drill his way through the compact earthen projectile, giving Ahiru the chance she had been waiting for.

Disentangling the chains around her forearm, she slams her palm onto the newly ripped floorboards. In that instant, most of her chains suddenly burrowed itself into the dark earth as if they were live

worms desperately digging through the softened soil to reach a particular target. With the chains secured, Ahiru quickly performs a few hand seals before again placing her open palms upon the floor. "Doton: Arijigoku no Wana no Jutsu (Earth Element: Ant Lion's Trap Technique)!"

Jiroubu stumbled unexpectedly. Looking down, he found that the ground beneath him had turned into a mud slide, rapidly softening into liquid sand, pulling him towards a quicksand whirlpool only three feet away from his current location. From the centre, a large jagged-jawed beetle's head made of stone suddenly popped out of the quicksand. The giant ant-like creature opened its mouth and fires out chains, which quickly wrapped itself around Jiroubu's limbs, immobilising him and dragging him faster towards its awaiting jaws to be crushed.

Struggling against the chain that held him captive, Jiroubu frowned in annoyance. He had tried reinforcing his limbs with chakra to break the chains, but the chains itself seem to have the ability of sucking his chakra away even before he could focus his strength. And unless he wanted to release the curse seal (of which was an act that would lead to his death if he dared do it here in the Hidden Air Village (14)), he was literally trapped. He had been caught by the genins once more due to his own underestimation and in far less time as well.

"Finish it unless you really want me to kill him." Ahiru snapped at Chouji while her eyes remained focussed upon the giant summoned stone ant.

"Bubun Baika no Jutsu! (Partial Multisize Technique)." With a single punch from Chouji's massive fists, Jiroubu was flung against the opposite walls and rendered unconscious relieving Ahiru from doing anything further.

"Phew." Ahiru re-adjusted her newly released chains (after dispelling her jutsu) back onto her forearms. "I gotta say.. that jutsu takes way too much out of me. If I had kept it up just 10 more seconds, I don't think I would be able to still stand."

Flexing the muscles on his bruised hand and looking over the unconscious Jiroubu, Chouji frowned in curiosity. "What do you mean? You packed a hell of a punch 2 days ago during our match up." He murmured in slight depression, thinking about his previous performances.

"Heh. That jutsu I just used is a chakra sucker. It takes way too much chakra to hold and I'm still unable to pull it off completely. So yeah, you should feel lucky that I used other means to defeat you." Punching her fists together, Ahiru gave Chouji a wicked grin, in which Chouji shielded away warily.

Some distance away, Sasuke and Reiko were doing their best to battle against the six-armed Kidoumaru.

"Kumo Soukai (Spider webbing)!" Spitting forth several one-meter length spider webs from his mouth consecutively, Kidoumaru stood back in order to analyse his opponents.

"Katon: Housenka! (Fire Element: Mythical Fire Flowers)" Sasuke breathed out several small balls of fire in a counter attack. The two projectiles impacted against one another precisely, resulting in several large explosions in which Sasuke's fire melted Kidoumaru's webbing.

"Che. Kumo Nenkin (Spider Web Adhesive Hypha)!" Kidoumaru formed several more, knife like creations from his mouth as he pulled them out one hand at a time.

"Kogatana Buto (Dance of the short blades)." Reiko suddenly erupted in a burst of speed, performing a series of high speed knife thrusts, all of which were haphazardly blocked by Kidoumaru's Kumo Ninken weapons. Reiko was fast and her attacks powerful; strong enough so to crack some of Kidoumaru's hardened weapons. Luckily for Kidoumaru however, he had had some experience fighting against Kimimaro's various bone-sword techniques. As such, he used all six of his arms together and still barely managed to come

out of Reiko's assault with a few minor cuts on each forearm. Jumping backwards away from the dangerously fast girl, Kidoumaru watched in shock as all six of his current Kumo Nenkin weapons suddenly crumbled due to the force of Reiko's attack. Narrowing his eyes in annoyance as he knew he currently didn't have enough chakra to perform a summon, Kidoumaru laced his chakra down his throat once more in preparation to create more kumo nenkin weapons.

Using a different tactic this time, Reiko placed her knives away before placing her hand upon her tight tank top's zip. Waiting until Kidoumaru's mouth bulged with the newly formed adhesive, Reiko suddenly sliced the zip down her own tank top, exposing her rather well-formed breasts for the world to see as Reiko doesn't usually wear a bra at all (luckily for Sasuke, he was standing behind her).

Suffice to say, Kidoumaru was exposed to the full frontal view of twin well-developed, pale and quite perky breasts since he was standing right in front of Reiko. As a result, he choked on his own kumo nenkin even while a steady drip of blood burst out of his nose.

Swallowing back the rather vile tasting adhesive back down his throat, Kidoumaru staggered as he continued to cough and choke. Hands wrapping tightly around his own throat and eyes shut in pure agony while his mind ran rampant with the images his eyes had witnessed just seconds ago, Kidoumaru was simply too distracted to notice what else was happening around him.

Multiple shurikens quickly flew around Kidoumaru's unsuspecting form, each with metallic strings attached. Sasuke tightened the strings on his end, resulting in Kidoumaru suddenly finding himself trapped within the metallic strings. "Katon: Ryuuka no Jutsu!" The intense flames left Sasuke's lips, rapidly travelling down the wires and reached Kidoumaru's immobile form, lighting the man's body up like a torch. Kidoumaru screamed in agony before he was soon rendered unconscious, his body severely scorched by Sasuke's powerful flames.

Standing nonchalantly beside her new teammate, Reiko slowly zipped her tank top back up, and gave Sasuke a wink before turning away from their burnt opponent and walked away with her hips swaying in a gleeful manner. Sasuke could only shake his head in embarrassment. / *Unpredictable, humiliating.. but affective.* / Sasuke couldn't help but think to himself as he followed behind his new female teammate.

Even before Sakon could charge his way towards the two remaining genins, Kei was already performing seals. As he finished his first set of hand seals, Kei muttered beneath his breath in a whisper: "Kankaku Okikae (Emotive Substitution)." However, nothing happened after the jutsu was activated, and Kei simply manoeuvred himself out of the way as Sakon punched towards him with what seems to be several fists all at the same time.

"Ta ren ken! (Machine gun punch!" Sakon called out even as his intended target (Kei) dodged away from his attack.

Breathing deeply while standing beside Kei, Samure's eyes never left Sakon even while he directed his question towards Kei. "Got any idea's? I have a feeling that that 'second' head on his back isn't just for aesthetics."

"I'm playing defensive at the moment, so I need you to distract him while I plan my traps." Kei muttered towards Samure, hoping the other boy could keep the man distracted for a little while yet.

"Got it." Samure agreed as he ran forward to engage Sakon in a Taijutsu match, even as he pulled out a small bottle of water from his ninja pouch and unscrewed the lid as he went along.

"Oh, going for a frontal assault." Sakon taunted as he flicked some of his fringe away from his face. "Well, let's get on it then!" Punching forward once more, Sakon left off a barrage of Ta Ren Ken. Samure counteracted by releasing the water from his water bottle in an arc in front of Sakon. Suddenly, Sakon's punches halted in mid air as they

impacted against a seeming floating wall of hardened ice, formed by the water that Samure had released in the first place.

Behind his thin shield of ice, Samure smirked. "Daiku isn't the only one who can manipulate ice. Though he is better than me, I can collect the individual molecules of ice and have it form whatever weapon I require." He answered confidently. In that instant, the wall of ice shattered into tiny droplets of water before reforming itself into ice needles. Controlling all the newly formed needles with invisible chakra strings, Samure sent them towards Sakon.

Sakon merely stood without moving as the various ice needles pierced his body, the man didn't even grunt in pain and Samure was slightly suspicious about his opponent seems high tolerance of pain. "Heh. A little water never hurt anyone." Sakon grunted in amusement. At the same time, the water needles still stuck on his body abruptly liquefied and seemed to be 'absorbed' into Sakon's body (15), leaving Samure without his primary source of weaponry.

While all this was going on, Kei had finally managed to complete a long list of hand seals in order to activate his next jutsu. "Nugui Kesu Ato (Erase Trace)." Upon completion of this jutsu, Kei's body seemingly disappeared into the air.

In his new invisible state, Kei quickly ran towards Sakon, avoiding the man's many limbs while managing to attach several of his specialty seals (also invisible) onto the man's body. Sakon, having seen Kei disappear some moments ago and suddenly feeling light touches upon his arms and back (even though he couldn't see anything touching him in those places) had effectively deducted what the invisible teen was up to. Reacting quickly after another soft touch upon his leg, Sakon quickly engaged his invisible foe with an offensive attack. "Ta Ren Kyaku! (Machine Gun Kick)."

Kei was kicked in the chest and face by Sakon's powerful kicks, resulting in the lanky boy being flung backwards and dispelling his invisibility jutsu. "I don't know what you did boy, but me and my

brother don't like being touched." Sakon sneered as he stepped threateningly towards Kei.

Kei, staying calm even while in his predicament, quickly placed his hands together in concentration. "Kankaku Okikae (Emotive Substitution) Activate!"

The reaction was instant as the jutsu Kei had performed earlier finally revealed its true face. Sakon stopped in mid step and his face paled to an extreme degree, as if he was seeing something he was terrified of. And indeed, Sakon had been placed in a special Genjutsu that showed him facing off against Orochimaru – his former master. Sakon, having been terrified of Orochimaru all along, was rendered unable to move by his fear alone. Behind him, Ukon finally woke up. As Ukon realised the predicament his twin brother is in, he naturally raised his own hands up in the creation of a Genjutsu Dispelling seal. "Genjutsu Kai!"

However, upon dispelling the Genjutsu placed upon Sakon's might, the 'release' also activated a invisible jutsu notes that Kei had placed upon Sakon's body just moments ago. In just a few seconds, both Ukon and Sakon suddenly found themselves soaked to the bone with water, then chilled into icicles, followed by being shocked with electricity and finally burnt to a crisp with fire that came out of nowhere. Evidently, the brother's body (after suffering through all that) just fell onto the ground unconscious.

"Woah. That's an incredible combination, man." Samure couldn't help but praise his new teammate. Kei simply nodded in acceptance of the praise before the two boys gathered back together with the rest of the genins teams, now facing off against the last of the four opponents – Tayua.

Tayuya simply narrowed her eyes in irritation as her gaze switched from Jiroubu to Kidoumaru to finally Sakon and Ukon. / *Useless bxxtards the lot of them. I told them no to underestimate the genins and what do they do. They don't fxxking listen, that's what. Absolute*

idiots I swear! / She thought to herself snottily before her gaze returned to the now confidently standing genins. "Well, congratulations for taking out all three of my comrades, but then again, you should all be aware that they weren't even using a third of their power. None the less, I'm impressed you got this far." Pausing for effect, Tayuya continued in a nonchalant voice. "Now, get along onto the next level, you don't have all day after all."

Most of the genins blinked at her in confusion. "Aren't you going to stop us from reaching our goal?" Chouji finally found the confidence to ask.

Tayuya smirked. "Nah.. I'm gonna wait until you guys come back **DOWN** from the eight level before you guys have to worry about fighting me. By then, you would be all tired, and I can fully prepare for your arrival." She answered snidely. "Now, get along. You've all still got seven levels to go."

Glaring at Tayuya, the genins slowly shuffled forward towards the stairs, all of their eyes firmly remained on the red-haired woman, just waiting for her to try something. But she didn't and soon, the genins found themselves upon the door to the second level. Taking a deep breath, Sasuke stepped forward and opened the wooden gate open...

... only to be pulled forward by a mysterious wind into the next level.

A loud splash could be heard all around. Soon, six heads popped out of what (at first glance) seems to be an endless ocean with large waves swaying the genins one way and suddenly the next, rapidly separating the genins and plunging them into its icy depths all at the same time.

"WHAT THE FXXK! HOW THE HELL DID WE GET TRANSPORTED INTO THE MIDDLE OF THE OCEAN!?" Ahiru yelled out at the top of her voice even as she struggled to stand upon the water using

chakra while avoiding being pulled down into a watery grave by the ranging waves surrounding her.

"Did you forget what Tayuya said before? We're trapped in a Genjutsu at the moment. And the only way to escape is to find the 'master seal' and destroy it!" Sasuke answered while jumping high in the air to avoid another massive tidal wave.

"Well then, where are we gonna find this 'master seal' anyway?" Reiko shot back rather snappishly, eyeing her disarrayed wet hair with a pout.

As if in answer to her question, a bubbling 'roar' erupted from beneath the genins.

"I think we're about to find out." Chouji muttered in warning, and how right he was.

A giant, purple ringed octopus rose from the ocean depths to glare at the genins. The octopus was very strange in the fact that it had a huge, bald, woman's head instead of your regular octopus head. Upon the 'neck' of the massive feminine head came the multitude of tentacles – long and sweeping with large suctions beneath. Suffice to say, the six Chuunin hopefuls were horrified by the sight.

"Oh my god, look at her forehead! Can you all see it!?" Samure's sudden shout brought all the genin's attention towards said forehead. All of whom could see a small paper attached onto the 'humanised' skin with the kanji for 'seal' written on it. "That's got to be the master seal!" Samure stated the obvious.

Kei moaned in depression. "...which means we'll have to fight that 'thing' to get to the master seal."

The next half an hour flew by with the six genins trying their best to get at the so-called 'master' seal with little to no success. Eventually, Reiko got so fed up with the entire thing that she simply flung one of her knives at the paper seal in irritation. The human-head octopus

tried to stop the flying projectile by lifting one of its giant tentacles to block it, but Reiko's sharp and chakra enhanced knife simply sliced right 'through' the tentacle and hit the master seal right on target. This action shocked the rest of the genins into immobilisation, but their shock soon wore off when a brilliant bright light suddenly flashed into being. When the light slowly dissipated, the genins found themselves all back in a dirty, rather old room within the forbidden tower. Overall, it was rather anticlimactic as the Shinobis slowly walked up towards the door that would lead them to the third level.

Now having some idea of what will meet them in the following levels, the genins were far more prepared when they were met with an endless desert when they came upon the next level. After spending the next hour trying to find and finally destroying the master seal that was attached to the underbelly of a giant sand worm, the tired genins trudged rather disheartened towards the forth level, only to be met by a dense rainforest.

Now, this rainforest was not your average rain forest. It had giant 'moving' trees with vines that actively tried to capture anything that moved. The genins also discovered huge flytrap plants that enthusiastically try to eat people, and giant flowers that spit out poisonous needles. It took the Ninja teens another hour before they figured out that their 'prey' was invisible (16). With that knowledge in mind, it became far easier for Sasuke to spot their culprit with his Sharingan and they soon destroyed the master seal that was attached to the foot of the alien like creature.

The fifth level brought the genins to the middle of an icy glacier – in which only Samure seemed to feel at home in. However, fighting a large abominable snowman just to get at the master seal upon the creature's hairy chest was not a fun adventure. Eventually, the genins triumphed and trudged towards the door for the sixth level.

This next level in the Forbidden tower was much more interesting as the genins found themselves in a middle of a giant toy house (17), filled to the brim with different toys, dolls, cars and accessories. Not

only that, but these toys can 'move'. As such, the whole event resulted in a rather chaotic 2 hours of being chased and run-over as the genins desperately searched for the ' **one** toy' that held the master seal. In the end, it was simply too much work for them to search through ever single toy. Sasuke simply performed Katon: Gogakyuu no jutsu en masses and burned the entire toy house down, including the **one** toy that had the master seal placed upon it (by the way, the ninjas never did find out which one it was).

The seventh level within the Forbidden tower was even stranger than the sixth, if that was possible. The Genjutsu the genins were trapped in depicted space, or specifically, the surface of the moon. And although none of the Shinobis had spacesuits to protect them from the vacuum, they were still rendered having to 'bounce' around in order to get from one point to the next due to the limited amount of gravity holding them onto the 'ground'. It was all a very disorientating atmosphere for the Chuunin hopefuls to experience, and one that they do not wish to go through again. Having found the master seal attached to a moving rock, the teens struggled to capture the floating object as every time they tried, they either over estimated the power of their launch (missing their target by a long shot) or under estimated the power of their launch (not reaching their target). In the end, all the genins had to work together to form a human chain in order to reach their objective, destroying the master seal and resealing themselves from the Genjutsu created world.

Standing in front of the eight and last door towards the highest level of the Forbidden tower, each of the genins took a deep breath to cement their composure. It has been a long day, they were all 'tired' but each one felt excitement at the prospect of finally reaching their goal. Stepping forward with slight nervousness, Samure reached his hand forward towards the door's handle, turned it, pushed it open and stepped into the room all with one breath.

This room was different from the rest of the levels, very much different. While the other levels were bereft of anything furniture,

object of things; this one was filled to the brim... with human skeletons. Skulls upon pikes lined the interior walls. Whole bodies strung together with metal wire hung from the enclosed roof. Piles upon piles of bones, large and small littered every corner of the room. It was easy to imagine the Forbidden tower as an eternal prison with so many human remains littering this one room. The air was stale, as if it hadn't been disrupted in a very long time. It didn't stink of rotting flesh per say, as there was no flesh left to rot, just dust and bones.

And sitting upon the middle of the room, on top of the dingy old floor stained with however old blood was a, live, old man in dirty rags. The man's hair was incredibly long and unkempt, as if he hadn't seen a comb or a scissor in a lifetime. His hands (which was the only thing the Genins could see of his body, as his face was covered by the long hair) were thin and bony. Sitting in the middle of his lap was the prophesized 'black box', exactly one foot in length, one foot in width, and one foot in depth – exactly as Kaga had described. Now, the only problem left for the genins was how to get the black box out of this prisoner's hands, literally.

Pausing as they were not sure how to proceed, the genins were brought out of their musings when the man finally spoke, in a dry, heaving voice as if it hadn't been used in years. "Guests? ... Visitors? ... Why are you here? ... Why have you come to see ... a condemned man?"

"We're here for the black box." Sasuke answered succinctly. "Will you give it to us?" He asked in a rather demanding voice.

A long silence followed. "This box..." The man began. "It holds my sins... my dreams... my past... why do you wish to take it away from me... what reason... do you wish to take my soul?" The man asked slowly, as if in a dream state.

Sasuke blinked before he answered truthfully. "We're genins participating in the Special Kuunoki Chuunin Exam. Our challenge is

to retrieve that black box and bring it back to Kaga-san by tonight. If we manage that, we pass this segment of the exam."

"Kaga?" The man repeated the name in remembrance. "Ah.. that young boy Tenka found, the scarred one. How is the boy doing?"

Sasuke blinked again. "Um... Kaga-san's no longer a *boy* . In fact, I'm sure he's in his 40's by now." He muttered softly.

"40's? Has it been that long already?" The man asked himself in a forlorn voice.

Shifting around nervously, Sasuke was just about to interrupt the old man's musings when the stranger spoke up once more. "I see. You've been given a 'mission' to retrieve this box, have you not? And you manage to traverse through all the prison guards and torture chambers to reach me? You must all be very strong..." The man muttered once more, figure still slumped slightly forward as if in a daze.

"Um... Other than the four ex-sound nins on the first level, there weren't any other prison guards." Chouji answered haphazardly.

"Hmn? Looks like times really have changed. No wonder I no longer hear the eternal moans and groans of the other prisoners. The screams of agony and insanity had stopped too I suppose. It's been too long... so very long..." The man finally raised his head and twin small, ruby red eyes could be barely seen beneath the layers of hair. "I suppose Kaga had intended for me to test you myself before granting you the burden of carrying my sins. So be it, my test... will be a trial by fire..."

Suddenly, a wall of fire erupted in a circle all around the old man burning everything in its path towards the genins. Bones, skulls, limbs, whole skeletons melted under the intensity of the heat. All six genins had absolutely no time to react before they too were engulfed by the living, burning inferno. The raging fire not only scorched their flesh, but the heat burned fiercely onto their chest, as if burrowing

itself into their very hearts and lungs. Screams of agony came forth from the young Shinobi's mouths, eyes widened in sheering pain as the fire pierced into their body through every opening – their eyes, their noses, mouths and even ears. The scorching heat seeped into their skins, burning their veins and setting ablaze all their body's nerves. Moments later, as the flames suddenly died out, leaving all six of the genins to collapse onto the ground – their bodies singed into blackness, smoke literally wafting from their scalded flesh as they each breathed in harshly the rotting air surrounding them in an attempt to cool their lungs.

All through out the process, the old man sat calmly as he watched for the reactions of the genins. Soon, it was apparent what he was looking for exactly.

Reiko continued to gasp in desperation for air, coughing now and again. Her eyes watered painfully against her hot skin but she dared not mutter another sound less the old man's attention fell upon her once more. Upon deducing her reaction to his inner fire, the strange old man finally concluded: "A wind elemental affiliate, definitely not suitable.

Twitching his gaze towards the twitching forms of Chouji and Ahiru, who were both trembling on the ground as if they had suffered a massive shock into their system, the strange man continued in his observations. "Two earth benders, not suitable either."

Changing his gaze once more towards the withering forms of Midou Kei and Yuse Samure, the man's ruby red eyes sharpened as he watch steam floating from the genin's superheated skins. "And two water users, opposing elements will not do." The man concluded as he turned his gaze to the final exam participant – Sasuke – who was currently on his hands and knees shivering in shock while at the same time heaving for fresh air. "Ah finally... A fire bender with talents in lightning, this one will be suitable. (18)"

Waiting for a few more minutes for the genins to recover, all of whom eventually staggered back onto their feet and glared at the old man

in intense anger, the man simply sat calmly. The genins were shocked to find that all their scorched skin soon turned back into its original, healthy states. All the burn marks disappeared and even the smoke in the air soon cleared up, leaving nothing and no sign of the initial fire. Overall, it looked as if they had been put through a very real, very painful Genjutsu. Their wandering attentions were soon brought back to the old man as he spoke up. "I have decided. You boy..." For the first time, the man raised a bony finger and pointed it towards Sasuke. "Answer me this. Have you met death in the eye, and if so, what is the colour of its eye?"

Sasuke could only blink in confusion before his memories brought him back to the past, to the time of the Uchiha massacre and how he had gazed into the terrifying eyes of his brother. "I've seen death up close and personal." He finally answered. "And he's eyes are red, blood red." He muttered softly.

"Red is for hate and vengeance. If that is the path you follow you will never reach the ultimate heights of enlightenment." The man abruptly sprouted some philosophical babble which quickly flew over Sasuke's head. "However, a true fire master, their eyes are gold."

Another long silence ensued, leaving all the exam participants tense in readiness for what was to happen next, only to be disappointed when the old man suddenly spoke up again. "Take my sins then, child of blood red eyes. We shall see if you are strong enough to carry my burden." And with those words, the old man raised his hands (black box and all) towards Sasuke. Slowly, the last Uchiha reached his hands forward, grabbed onto the box delicately before pulling it out of the old man's grasp quickly, as if expecting some sort of trap. Nothing happened.

Another awkward pause later, and Sasuke quickly turned to his teammates. "Okay, let's go." The newly formed Team 5 quickly left the highest level of the Forbidden tower, with the members of team 9 hot on their heels, leaving the old man alone in his imprisonment. And so end their adventure with the warden of the Forbidden tower.

"Damn it. We all worked together to make it all the way to the top, but now that we've finally got our hands on the target, we're suddenly enemies!" Chouji could not help but growl out in frustration as he narrowly avoided a flying chain rail directed at his head from Ahiru who was running up behind them.

"We've got to escape while slowing them down some how." Sasuke snapped, stating the obvious. The black box in his arms was becoming heavier and heavier with every step, and the last Uchiha couldn't help but feel more exhausted as every second ticked on. It was as if the black box was draining his chakra or life force away, little by little, draining him of all his energy.

"I can distract them for a while but I don't know how long it'll hold." Reiko answered as she ducked beneath several kunai aimed at her head. "We still need some way to go faster though."

"I can turn into my Baika no Jutsu (multisize technique) form and simply roll down the various levels, since we don't have to fight any more Genjutsu on the way." Chouji suggested from his side.

Sasuke simply nodded in acceptance, feeling too tired to even answer back with a verbal response. It was taking all his concentration to keep on running.

"Right." Coming to a sudden stop, Reiko raised her hands in a quick set of hand seals. "Let's see how you deal with this original 'S'-class technique of mine. Orgy no Jutsu! (19)" After Reiko's abrupt words, a massive cloud of smoke emerged from thin air, and as the smoke cleared, you could see hundreds of naked bodies – all of different genders, various sizes, skin tones, and hair colours – 'humping' one another all over Samure, Kei and Ahiru. Suffice to say, Samure passed out at being smothered in the face by someone's breasts, and having another person's hands down his pants. Ahiru, wasn't fairing much better as she was dragged down underneath at least twelve naked male figures, screeching at the top of her lungs for them to 'STOP TOUCHING HER **THERE**'. Even Midou Kei, who

was supposedly used to Reiko's perverseness, simply surrendered himself to the masses of gyrating naked bodies.

Quickly twisting his eyes far away from the moaning and groaning mass of bodies, Sasuke snapped at Chouji to 'hurry the hell up,' while leaving an immensely satisfied Reiko to stare at her wonderful jutsu.

It didn't take long for Chouji to use Nikudan Sensha (Human Cannon Ball) in order to roll down the various stairs and rooms within the Forbidden tower. Sasuke and Reiko were settled on top of Chouji's rotating body, having to run in a 'backwards' direction just to keep up with Chouji's speed. Eventually, the members of team 5 pulled far ahead of team 9 before reaching down to the last level – the first level in which they all knew Tayuya was still very much awake and ready for their return.

"About time you guys got your asses back down. It's already sundown for fxxk's sake." Tayuya snorted unladylike as she stood in the middle of the first floor waiting for team 5's return. In her hand, she held a long but thin silver flute – a perceptively delicately thing. "Well, shall we begin?" She taunted as her gaze focussed instantly at black box held within Sasuke's hands. Lifting the flute to her lips, Tayuya murmured softly. "Demonic flute: Illusion Harmony." And then Tayuya started playing a slow but chilling melody, one that brought sudden fear up each genin's spines.

As the Genjutsu of the melody came into affect, all three genins found themselves unable to move. By that time, Chouji had already released his body from the Nikudan Sensha and was kneeling upon the ground like his comrades. As for Sasuke, even though he had his Sharingan at full activation at the moment, but that did not stop his ears from hearing the melody and the effect it has on his body. Simply put, even with the Sharingan, he was still stuck in Tayuya's Genjutsu. Reiko had always been a specialist in Taijutsu only, as such, she was pretty much useless against Genjutsu types.

All three genins found themselves trapped in yet another Genjutsu world – a strange desert like environment underneath a thin layer of water high above their heads. Thin but sturdy vines pierced through the layer of water and wrapped around their kneeling forms, immobilising them for Tayuya's pleasure. Skulls and other human bones littered the ground before them and soon, they found their own flesh melting away to expose muscle, blood vessels and even bones. Chouji could not take the sight of seeing the inside of his stomach and was soon screaming to the heavens, pleading for Tayuya to stop. Reiko too, was absolutely mortified as she watched her beautiful green hair wilt and die, darkening to a dry grey colour with textures of a twig. Sasuke shut his Sharingan eyes and bit his lip in concentration. Drawing pain and blood from his actions, he re-opened his Sharingan eyes wide and in that moment, he released a burst of chakra all over his body, resulting in him dispelling the Genjutsu on his own terms.

Tayuya was rather surprised by Sasuke's actions, but did not have time to praise the boy as the last Uchiha rushed towards her with a kunai in hand. Tayuya blocked Sasuke's chakra enhanced kunai with her silver flute. Sasuke then swung downwards to try and trip Tayuya, whom managed to jump up in time to avoid him. Sasuke then flipped onto his hands, performing an up-side-down cartwheel, managing to kick Tayuya's stomach with his feet. Stumbling backwards from Sasuke's second attack, Tayuya growled angrily at the Uchiha. "Fine. No more miss nice girl!" Tayuya snapped back like a beast, before slamming the tip of her flute onto the ground. "Genjutsu Kuchiyose (Illusion Summoning)!" She cried out loud and within seconds, ripples started emerging from where her flute stood against the once solid ground, which at the moment looked more like a liquid ground. Several air bubbles also popped out of the rippling ground. Soon, a large dragon like head emerged some metres in front of Tayuya's crouched form. It's long, scaly tail rose slowly while swinging side to side some metres behind Tayuya. Slowly, the entire dragon emerged from the ground up. The dragon's malignant eyes glowed fiery red as the rest of its hideously textured body stomped

several feet towards Sasuke. Tayuya, standing upon its back with a confident smirk upon her face, finished the whole picture.

"Shxt. How are we gonna fight that?" Having been released from their Genjutsu trap when Tayuya was distracted by Sasuke, Chouji couldn't help but state the obvious in such a circumstance.

"We don't." Sasuke suddenly spoke up as he skidded beside them, having ran back from where he stood before. "Our first priority is to escape with the black box. Remember, Tayuya mentioned that they aren't allowed to leave the tower, so all we have to do is distract her or hold her off until we get out through the doors." He answered, eyes never leaving the monstrosity of a dragon.

"Easier said than done! I don't know about you, but I've got nothing up my sleeve that could keep *that* thing distracted." Reiko snapped back nervously, holding tightly onto her knives, of which suddenly seemed so small in comparison to the dragon.

"And I don't think I have the strength to arm wrestle with what seems to be a 500 tonne dragon." Chouji replied back sarcastically.

"Fine! I'll handle this, just be prepared to run when I say so." Sasuke shot back as he quickly launched into a series of hand seals. He was a little bit nervous performing this jutsu for the first time. It was just an idea he had before, and after seeing the same effect of other 'similar' jutsus, he thought maybe he could create the same effect only using this particular element. Finished with his seals, Sasuke took a deep breath before realising it all into a long and powerful fire dragon. "Katon! Hon no Kabe (Fire Element: Wall of Flames)!" The fire dragon circled all around Tayuya's dragon before returning to where it originated from, creating a circular wall of fire around three metres high.

Heaving against his chest, Sasuke nodded at the others before he quickly picked up the black box and turned towards the door leading to the outside world. Not wasting any time as they knew the wall of flames probably won't last long, both Reiko and Chouji rushed after

Sasuke. When the members of team 5 broke through the less than sturdy doorway and disappeared into the distance, the summoned wall of fire slowly died out, leaving behind a disappointed Tayuya and her dragon summon.

"Damn. I was hoping I could play with them a little longer." Tayuya muttered under her breath. Then, she heard a groaning sound from upstairs, and she smirked as she remembered there was still another team stuck in the upper levels somewhere. "Well, guess we could give the *other* team some problems, can't we..." Her grin turned positively evil.

xxx XXX xxx **Conclusion**

By night time, Team 10 had brought in their captured Golden Firefly which was promptly assessed, judged as the correct specimen and set free. At first, Temari and Asahi were rather put off that Kaga had simply released the captured animal as they had spent such a long time trying to capture it in the first place. But after hearing Kaga announced that they had officially completed Mission C, the three Genins were off to celebrate.

A few hours later, Gaara and the rest of team 1 arrived, with a much more chaotic entrance – as in, Gaara literally flew in on his sand with swarms of Library Guards and even Neji's team 4 racing after them. But after a quick glimpse over the scroll's contents, Kaga announced that team 1 had successfully completed their mission, and then gave the scroll back to the rather irritated Library Guards whom now had the chore of fixing the Library back to its original state. Neji's team 4 were left huffing and puffing by the sides, severely disappointed that after all they did and how hard they tried, they didn't manage to get to the scroll first.

A few of the failed teams tried to get involved in the final mission that was still available – namely Mission A, but most of the others simply opted to miss out, figuring that the teams whom had started off on Mission A would have been way ahead of them already, and not to mention they needed the time to rest.

Several more hours later, when night had fallen and the moon was full, a gathering of strange people following in the footsteps of Team 5 (Uchiha Sasuke, Chouji and Reiko) finally arrived with the aforementioned black box. The members of team 5 looked exhausted from their adventure. Chouji practically staggering on his own feet, leaning heavily on Reiko; and Reiko looking far worse for wear – her thin clothes ripped in certain areas while large bruises appeared upon several areas on her delicate skin.

Before all three members of team 5 could collapse onto the ground in sheer tiredness, Kaga took the black box from Sasuke's shaky hands and assessed if it is what they were suppose to find. Nodding in acceptance, Kaga announced that team 5 have accomplished Mission A, resulting a short round of applause from a few of the Genin teams stationed around the empty arena.

Waving his hands around in the air to get the genin's attention, Jubei refocused their attention back onto the main topic of discussion. "Alright. Thank you all for your patience. The final scores are in, and here are the top 8 finalists in random order. Please step forward as your name is called and pick a number out of this box." Jubei indicated the small box currently being held by Akiko standing beside him. "Sakeyama Asahi. Naja Daiku. Rensa Ahiru. Sabaku no Gaara. Aburame Shino. Sasayaki Kageru. Yuse Samure and Sabaku no Temari."

There was a wave of groans and disappointed sighs, but they soon dispersed as each of the named Genins stepped forward, picked a numbered paper from the box and showed it to the rest of the proctors to be recorded down by Hikari as they went along. "Okay. In one month's time, the final tournament of the Kuunoki Chuunin exam will be held in the city of Bai Ling and here are the match sets:"

"Sabaku no Gaara versus Rensa Ahiru."

"Naja Daiku versus Aburame Shino."

"Yuse Samure versus Sabaku no Temari."

"And lastly, Sasayaki Kageru versus Sakeyama Asahi."

"Recommendation for Chuunin rank will be provided via a scroll that will be given to you AFTER the Chuunin tournament, or whenever you leave the Kuunoki grounds. For those of you who have been granted an apprenticeship, you are welcomed to stay behind and continue your studies after the entire exam if you wish. Alternatively, you are welcomed to leave and return to your village of origin whenever you like. Congratulations everyone on getting through the Kuunoki's first official Chuunin Exam." Claps of applause erupted from every one of the Gate Guardians as they looked over the group of Genins with pride in their eyes. Finally, the Chuunin exams are over. All that's left is for the genins to follow through with their apprenticeships, and or finding someone to train with.

(1) Inspired by Neon Genesis Evangelion – how Shinji always fists his palms and then release them, fist them again and release once more – as a sign of him trying to gather his courage and over come his nerves.

(2) Yes, it was my intension to jumble all the conversations without stating who said what. It isn't important who said what, as long as you know what they're saying. And I just wanted to capture the truncated atmosphere of the conversations, hence this muddle of noise.

(3) Please refer to the map of the Kuunoki Village I've got uploaded on my site. It'll make more sense that way.

(4) This bit was a prelude to Tsubame's history in Hidden Cloud. Please go to my website and read Tsubame's character profile for a better understanding.

(5) I have a picture of this on my website. Go and have a look. The 'Golden Firefly' was inspired by the 'Golden Snitch' – yes the very same from Harry Potter . So if you want to imagine what it'll look like in real life, think of the Golden snitch. Even though design wise, I

took my inspiration from the anime D.Grayman , specially the flying 'Timcampy'.

(6) New mind Jutsu for Ino, coupled with the Shintenshin no Jutsu, she could read through the person's memories for information she wanted. However, she doesn't read everything about the person she had taken control over, it's more like thinking of a word or thing, and get looking through all the victim's thoughts regarding said item, and ONLY those thoughts that relate to said item.

(7) "Soccer" is what we call "football" in Australia. You know the one, the ball patterned with black and white pentagons and hexagons. I'll have a picture of this structure drawn up and scanned onto my website, please go to my profile's page to have a look.

(8) Tsubame just struck me as 'SUCH' a goodie-too-shoe character, you know the types – the bookworms that are the teacher's favourite students and they always get 'A's for any assignments. Sort of like Sakura (Academy version Sakura) but not as fan-girlish.

(9) You could probably tell by now I'm making stuff up as I go along.

(10) Hehe! You guessed right, AVATAR – the Last Airbender has been added into my wonky story. Apologies Avatar fans (of which I am one), but I'm gonna screw up the history of the Avatar universe to fit my story!

(11) Inspired by the 'Water Bending' scroll – an episode from Avatar – the Last Airbender .

(12) Yes, I've made Tayuya the new unofficial 'leader' of the ex-sound four, now they're just 4 new servants for Ruri and Kaga.

(13) This is NOT an accurate record of how many levels or realms of hell there is in whatever religion, I'm just using this number to match the number of stories is in that damn building. I know that Chinese Daoism believe there are 18 levels of hell, and I'm sure other (real

life) religions have different numbers as well. So basically, ignore this phrase for it has nothing to do with real life.

(14) When the Sound 4 were brought into the Hidden air Village, they were originally treated as prisoners of war. Slowly, they struck a bargain with Kaga and Ruri, resulting in them working for Kaga and Ruri in return for some freedom and a lessening of their punishments. One of the rules for keeping their 'employment' with Kaga and Ruri is that they will never be able to use the curse seal as long as they are located in the Hidden Air village, hence why Jiroubu and the others can't use their curse seal when fighting against the genins.

(15) Remember how Ukon (Sakon's twin brother) in his curse seal level two state could merge into Kiba's body and take control of it. Well, in my story, as I refuse to let the Sound 4 use their curse seals, I let them have similar abilities but on a much smaller scale – hence why Sakon/Ukon's body are able to assimilate into other people's bodies, or (on an opposite scale) assimilate things into their own body as long as it can be converted into cells and such. Obviously, over 70 percent of a human body is made out of water, which is why it's easy for Sakon/Ukon to be able to merge Samure's water needles into their own body.

(16) It is the Predator! That's right, from the movies: The Predator (with Arnold Swatzinager) and Alien Versus Predator .

(17) This Genjutsu 'world' was inspired by a section within the manga of Houshin Engi , where by Youzen and his sensei Gyoukuten Shinjin were fighting against Son Tenkun within his Akukan of a room filled with puppet.

(18) I'm referring to their main elemental affiliation. We all know from reading the manga that Naruto is affiliated with Wind, and Kakashi with lightning and so forth. As such, this old man is looking for someone who is affiliated with the element of fire, just as he himself is. Unfortunately, fire elementals are rare in the Hidden Air village, hence why he had to test them.

(19) Yes, you heard right. 'Orgy no jutsu' is as its names suggests, a giant orgy. It is an original technique for Reiko, created by yours truly (me). It's only an S-class jutsu because it completely devastates most people in Hidden Grass country when Reiko first tested it out.

Has anyone noticed that I always seem to change my mind regarding this story's plotline at the last second before I start writing a new chapter? This happens all the time. I would think about doing something, record it down as part of the plotline this story follows. But when the time comes for me to write said scenes, I change my mind; and hence why this story keeps on getting longer and longer. But I have to admit, it keeps things interesting. Hope you all don't mind putting up with me and my oddities.

Anyway, for those who are interested, I've uploaded a 'Chuunin Exam' webpage on my website that details out all the various stages of this Chuunin Exam, explaining things that are different. I've also uploaded new pictures regarding the Chuunin Exam on that page (e.g. the statues, what the arena looks like, what does the golden firefly looks like, etc.). So please go to my website (links are on my profiles page) to see them if your interested.

Recap, team numbers, members, missions and successes:

Team 1 – **Succeeded in Mission B**

Yamanaka Ino, Sabaku no Gaara and Jikizuka Tsubame

Team 2 – Failed in Mission B

Asagiri Kaori, Sakeyama Saporu and Tenten

Team 3 – Failed in Mission C

Kankuro, Hyuuga Hinata and Rock Lee

Team 4 – Failed in Mission B

Gengakki Mogoto, Hyuuga Neji and Iwama Uzura

Team 5 – **Succeeded in Mission A**

Uchiha Sasuke, Akimichi Chouji and Kawasaki Reiko

Team 6 – Failed in Mission C

Waisa Bado, Yakushi Suzumi and Harate Eiji

Team 7 – Failed in Mission C

Inuzuka Kiba, Naja Daiku and Harate Echiko

Team 8 – Failed in Mission B

Kapasu Juro, Sasayaki Kageru and Gojou Hikon

Team 9 – Failed in Mission A

Yuse Samure, Midou Kei and Rensa Ahiru

Team 10 – **Succeeded in Mission C**

Temari, Sakeyama Asahi and Aburame Shino

Recap, people with apprenticeship:

- (Snow) Yuse Samure – Dokudes Hana (Seiko's father)
- (Sand) Temari – Kazeha Akiko
- (Leaf) Aburame Shino – Shinzo Yami
- (Grass) Midou Kei – Oniyoubu Jin (Yami's father)
- (Snow) Goujo Hikon – Raitei Hikari

- (Mist) Harate Echiko – Kaiba Umi (Mishizu's mother, sister to one of the 7 Swordsman of the Mist 'Shinji')
- (Stone) Rensa Ahiru – Kataichi Kaito (Tori's father)
- (Cloud) Sakeyama Asahi – Raitei Hideki (Koushiro and Hikari's father)

Individual Direction

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Thirty-three: Individual Direction

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** */ Thoughts /*, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: OOCness. This chapter will be slow and almost pointless, but I think we all needed a break from the constant fighting from the previous chapters. It's a good break, I think.

Chapter 33

The next morning dawned bright and early for the Chuunin exam participants. For those genins who had been invited to become apprentices, they had already left with their supposed masters; leaving behind only those whom still had yet find training partners to help them for the duration of the one month period.

As the sun shone through the windows of the genin's allocated residence, Hinata hummed to herself as she gently placed another rice ball into her bento-box, all ready and packed for her early

morning journey. There was a soft knock on her door before it slid open unceremoniously to reveal Gaara's passive face.

"Are you nearly done, Hyuuga-san?" Gaara's calm but rather monotone voice questioned.

"Hmn, just a minute, Gaara-san." Hinata answered back as she quickly sliced up the sushi she had made before placing all the pieces into the bento box in a presentable manner, and then shutting the box closed. "Hai, I'm ready." She took hold of the handle and lifted it as she stood.

The two genins turned unanimously towards the door and stepped out, only to stop abruptly just before colliding with Chouji and Ino.

"Eh. What are you two doing here in the kitchen so early in the morning?" Chouji questioned, his eyebrows rising to his forehead in confusion, and then frowned suddenly in suspicion. "You're not trying to steal all the food, are you?"

"lie. Chouji-kun. No, I was just using the facilities to make this obento for later on." Hinata indicated to the box she was holding.

Ino, who was standing behind Chouji, frowned as her eyes went from Hinata, to the box, to Gaara, and then back to the box. She then shot back rather snippily with: "Are you two going out on some sort of date?"

Hinata blushed crimson and stuttered out. "No NO! Nothing like that!" Forcing chakra into her face to manually manipulate the blood vessels upon her face, Hinata managed to reduce her blush through her training as a medical ninja. "I planned to make this bento box for Naruto-kun. And Gaara-san here would also like to meet up with either Naruto-kun or Uzumaki-sama."

Gaara simply shrugged at Ino's accusation before coming up with his own reasoning. "I haven't been granted an apprenticeship, so I've got no one to train with. If there's anyone in the entire Air Village who

would know *who* could help in training me, it would be either Naruto or Ruri-sama. After all, they can see the future, they must know someone or some way I can improve myself."

"Hm. I never thought of that. Maybe I'll join you." Chouji replied before he pushed his way through into the kitchen. "After Breakfast of course, it's the most important meal of the day, don't you know?" The chubby boy said cheerfully, walking directly to the massive fridge to look for something to eat.

"Um... I... um.. Can I come with you?" Ino suddenly spoke up, a slight flush appearing on her face. Silently however, she gave a sigh of relief at Hinata and Gaara's explanations.

"I don't see why not." Hinata smiled back at Ino earnestly, before looking at Gaara for his opinion. Gaara only shrugged once more.

Without further ado, the three genins stepped out of the genin's current residence and into the grassy gardens that lay before them. They met up with a few of the other Genins during their travel; and some had even decided to come along as well. Kankuro decided to remain behind with Chouji, resting up. But Lee, Neji, Tenten, Kiba and Sasuke decided to go with the trio on their trip. Even Daiku, the friendly snow Nin had decided to go along, as both of his teammates were granted apprenticeships.

"Heh. You brats really think you're so cool, huh? Gathering together on a field trip of some sort? Do you all still need your mommies to hold your hand while you walk down the street?" Waisa Bado taunted, the cloud ninja just could not accept the fact that one of his teammates had been granted an apprenticeship and he had not. Another irritating point in his day is that Saporu (his other teammate) had spent the entire night drinking herself to a stupor in celebration of her brother being one of the 8 participants in the final tournament. Now, Saporu's probably sleeping off her massive hangover, leaving Bado to brood on his own. This is why Bado couldn't help but make fun of the gathering Konoha Nins. They're simply too easy to rile up.

Neji and Kiba were both ready to beat the shit out of the irritating Cloud Nin when Hinata forcefully held them back. And the company was soon on their way once more. Crossing over the various bridges to make their way to the long stairway towards the white palace on the highest tip of the Kuunoki village, Hinata and the others took the time to look around and admire the beauty that is the Hidden Air Village.

"It's so peaceful. The last few days have been so hectic that I never realised how quiet and serene this place is. No crowds, no loud and busy market places, no academy filled with students and teachers. It's really... eerily quiet." Tenten commented as her eyes glanced from one building to the next. "Anyway, where is everyone?"

"Have you forgotten already, Tenten? During the tour, Shikamaru and Sakura had already explained to us that most of the time, you don't see any of the Kuunoki inhabitants. Because they're always busy with something or another, they rarely inhabit the streets. One of the only times you get to meet any of them would be during meal times and or other unseal events – like the Chuunin Exams." Neji answered Tenten's question in a calm but rather reticent manner.

"I'm just saying..." Tenten grumbled beneath her breath, annoyed at Neji's passive aggression.

"Indeed, I agree with Tenten. The quietness and absolute stillness of this place is disrupting my 'power of youth'. Even I'm feeling rather uncomfortable in this almost desolate city." Lee argued in Tenten's defence. However, his other teammates ignored him the moment they heard the words 'power of youth', which left Lee feeling rather put off.

"Are you two even LISTENING TO ME?!" Lee shouted out in order to gain his team mate's attentions, which only made them wince in pain due to the ringing in their ears.

"Lee! Quiet down. Your voice sounds like a bull horn in this almost silent environment." Tenten snapped at the green clad figure.

"Indeed. You should learn to be more calm and reserved. Such enthusiasm is not appreciated in times of serenity." Neji commented, unconsciously praising the ways of the Hyuuga – distant and serene.

Leaving Lee, Tenten and Neji to occupy their time arguing over the merits of enthusiastic loudness versus cold serenity, Sasuke shook his head to ward off any wandering thoughts. He looked forward and glanced at the back of Hinata's head, whom was leading their small gathering of travellers; and then turned around to look at Kiba who was mumbling softly to Akamaru and Daiku. Thinking over the sacrifices of his new teammates during the journey towards the Kuunoki, Sasuke couldn't help but feel as if he had somehow messed up the relationship between the members of his previous team.

/ I never really treated Sakura and Naruto with the level of respect I do with Hinata or the level of rivalling comradeship with Kiba. Did I? / Frowning slightly in remembrance, Sasuke shuddered when he thought of the time he had almost abandoned Naruto in the Forest of Death during the Konoha Chuunin Exams (1). */ If it hadn't been Sakura, I may have completely abandoned Naruto like a pathetic coward. And then, there was the time when I ran to Orochimaru in pursuit of power. Sakura came to rescue sure, but I think... I think I destroyed something precious between us with my decision to leave. I think... that was the day I lost respect in her eyes, and then... we just... kinda drifted apart I guess. /* Ignoring the minor spasm of pain that originated from his heart, Sasuke continued to think to himself, wondering, analysing how his past misdeed had corrupted his relationship with his original team members.

/ Naruto and I were never really that close. He was distant to begin with, holding so much power and secrets that I was blinded by my jealousy. And then I thought maybe I could use him as a stepping stone to measure my own level of power. But he just kept drifting further and further away from me, becoming so much stronger than imaginable – like how he had defeated Gaara so effortlessly

compared to my abysmal match. Even in the curse seal level 2, I still couldn't defeat Gaara. That kind of power, that kind of strength... I do not have. And I hated him for it. / Sasuke thought to himself forlornly. / Indeed, Naruto was distant to begin with, but I never really tried to get much closer other than as rivals for power. I never made that effort to get to know him. And yet, he still risked his life to save me. / Thinking about how Naruto had showed him the vision of an alternate but possible future for himself, made Sasuke shudder once more (2). / I don't ever want to become like that. I don't want to become a monster that's just as bad, if not worse than Itachi. I can't bare it. /

Thoughts wandering once more to the last member of Team 7 from Konoha, Sasuke couldn't stop an ironic grin from escaping his face. / *Kakashi. I think I disappointed him one time too many. The man still cares, and he still helps me with training – after all, the guys the only one other than Itachi that has a working Sharingan... but. But sometimes I see that **glint** in his eyes - a look of regret and disappointment. I can't stand that look. I can't stand the fact that he's only helping me because he feels SORRY for me. I can't stand the pity and the theatrical sympathy, with a hidden layer of disappointment and shame. I HATE IT! And because of that... because of that... I haven't talked to Kakashi for months... I didn't... I couldn't face the man I once called sensei... I couldn't stand it if I see that layer of shame and disappointment in his eyes again. No, I've made my mistakes and I will continue to pay the price for them. /*

Eyes shifting once more to Hinata and Kiba, Sasuke made a silent promise to himself. / *I won't throw my new teammates away like I did with my previous team. I'll make amends, I'll change. I'll do my best to keep my new family, my friends... with me, to accept me. I... I don't want to be alone anymore. / And so concludes Sasuke's inner wish. / I don't want to be alone anymore. /*

Standing the furthest away from the surviving Uchiha, Ino tried to converse with a silent Gaara standing beside her.

"So, eh.. Gaara-san. How have you been? You know, coping with the pressures of the Chuunin exam and all?" Ino asked hesitantly, not entirely sure that her questions would be welcomed by the stoic Suna Nin. But Gaara only shrugged in nonchalance.

"It's okay. Kaga-san and the other Gate Guardians put a lot of thought into the various stages of the exam. I am impressed with the amount of planning and ingenuity applied to the test. Even for someone like me, it was hard." The Sand prodigy admitted.

"Yeah, too true." Ino agreed as she thought back to how badly she had performed during the first stage of the exam. "Anyway! Congratulations on making it to the short listing for the tournament. I'll be rooting for you to win." Ino twitched the conversational topic abruptly, not wanting to continue any depressing thoughts on her own performance.

"You did surprisingly well, yourself, Yamanaka-san. Do don't doubt your own strength." Gaara encouraged uncharacteristically, leaving Ino rather dumbfounded as his compliment.

Spirits rising once more at the praise, Ino felt daring. "Ano... Gaara-san?"

Gaara looked back at Ino with a raised eyebrow (that is, if he had an eyebrow) in confusion.

"Can I ask you a... um... personal... uh question?" Ino asked hesitantly.

Gaara shrugged and the nodded in acceptance. Ino gulped before pulling on all her courage and blurt out the one question she's been dying to know the answer to. "What type of girls do you like?"

Gaara blinked.

"You know. Um... What is your ideal dream girl like? I mean, what are her physical features? Like, uh, hair colour, eye colour. That type

of thing..." Ino continued to blab as her nervousness quickly overwhelmed her within nanoseconds. After all, what type of person asks THE Sabaku no Gaara his personal preferences in regards to girls.

Gaara however, ignorant of Ino's rise in anxiety, frowned in concentration. He took Ino's inquiry rather seriously, thinking through all the girls he had ever had any contact with and how they made him feel. / *The only girls I really associate myself with are Temari and Ruri-sama. That's it... I suppose that's better than nothing.* / "In answer to your question, Ino-san. I would have to say that some physical features in a hypothetical female I would find myself associating with would probably include blond hair, and either green or blue eyes." Gaara answered in all seriousness.

Behind him, Ino froze in shock. / *Blonde hair, check! Blue eyes, double check!! I HAVE A CHANCE!!!!* / Inner Ino pulled two thumbs up in celebration before performing her own miniature dance inside Ino's still frozen mind.

"Mou. I'm feeling kinda left out here, you know. With Samure and Hikon both apprentices learning under their masters, that just leaves me on my lonesome." Daiku all but huffed in indignation at the injustice of it all.

"At least you made it to the final 8 participants that will be fighting in the tournament. I don't see why you're complaining. Now, **me** on the other hand, failed to even make the tournament. I should be the one to complain." Kiba retorted back rather snappishly, still feeling depressed that he hadn't done as well as he had hoped.

"Ah! Don't feel depressed, matey. It's all in the luck of things. I mean, Hikon received an apprenticeship but she wasn't one of the top 8 either. I got into the top 8 but not an apprenticeship. Then again, I don't think there's ever an Ice expert here in the Kuunoki, hence why I haven't been chosen." Daiku tapped a finger on his chin in a thoughtful manner.

"And me? I didn't get into the top 8 OR an apprenticeship!" Kiba grumbled once more, only to have Akamaru bark encouragingly at him from his side. "It's okay, Akamaru. I'm just a little disappointed in myself, that's all. I had hoped with us training so much and working our ass off, that we might be able to make it all the way, you know..."

"Come on! Don't feel so down and out. Look on the bright side. You managed to take on the best of the best the world has, and live. Hell, it's was torture just to get here in the first place. There were only 10 teams that made it out of how many hundreds from various villages. Just think on it. You're probably ranked as one of the top 10 percent in the world leagues." Daiku explained positively, building upon Kiba's ego somewhat.

"Yeah. You're right. We did get here in the end, when so many others had failed. We did GOOD! Akamaru!" Kiba gave his pet dog a well deserved patting on the heard, in which Akamaru returned with the cheerful series of barks. "Hehe, you said it, Akamaru. Sooner or later, we're gonna trump them all. Just you wait, world, Akamaru and I are an unstoppable force!"

Daiku only sweat dropped as he looked upon their antics. "Maybe I went a little overboard with the ego boost."

Hinata hummed softly to herself as she practically skipped up the stairs that guttered out from the mountain side. She was so looking forward to seeing Naruto again. She had missed her roommate immensely since the start of this entire exam. And though she would not regret a single moment of it (as it had proved to her once and for all that she is strong and is able to get even stronger), but that didn't mean she didn't miss the comfort of home and presence of her dear sister and Naruto.

Hinata knew that she had come a long way from the shy, timid little girl from the Konoha Academy. She was a Medic Nin, with a high level understanding on herbs and medicinal creams (second only to Tsunade and Shizune), and she was proficient in her own original

style of Jyuuken techniques. Hell, she even took down Neji in the last fight, *the* Hyuuga prodigy. It was a giant confidence boost for Hinata, one that she had needed in order to move forward. And now that she had the acknowledgement she had always been deprived on when she was young, she found that she could move forward and perhaps let Naruto know of her interest in him as more than just a friend.

Hinata was still shy in her own way, she was still nervous about what Naruto would think of her. But at least, she wasn't running away and hiding from her emotions anymore. Moving forward is her aim, Hinata didn't know whether Naruto could accept her as more than just a friend or not, but that uncertainly wasn't going to stop her from letting him know about her stance of things. She hated the constant fretting, worrying about how he never noticed her, the anxiety and depression from hiding her own emotions. Hinata was over it all. She could and would do this; let her feelings be known.

And so, Hinata spent her time giving herself a mental pep talk while humming outwardly to calm her nerves. *I'll do it. I'll tell Naruto-kun about my feelings for him. I'll do it... I*

It took the genins almost an hour to slowly walk their way through the village and up the stairs before they finally reached their destination. Once they had reached the front yards of the Uzumaki residence, the aforementioned white palace, what they found before them was a large white structure with grey tiled roofs, tall walls, several 'windows' and one large wooden door. Being one of the ones leading their group, Gaara didn't hesitate in knocking his knuckles against the wooden doors and waited patiently for a reply.

A long moment of silence followed before the large doors were slowly opened to reveal a tall but thin looking boy with a mop of brown hair spiky up and out in all directions. "Ah. Sabaku no Gaara-san, Ruri-sama is awaiting your arrival, I will guide you to her." Looking over the rest of the genins (whom all held hopeful looks upon their faces). "Ruri-sama does not wish to be visited by anyone

else other than Gaara-san. Hence, I will guide rest of you to meet Naruto-sama. Please come this way." Opening the door wider for the group of genins to pass through, the older boy passively closed the doors once more before guiding the genins on their way.

Hinata gasped softly as he gaze fell upon the natural beauty before her. About 50 metres away from the front entrance was a large 2 storey mansion, complete with white walls, tall pillars and beautiful coloured glass windows. The roof tiles were once again made of traditional grey tiles, stretching from one end of the massive building to the other, and along all the rooftops of the perimeter walls. But that wasn't all that caught Hinata and the other genin's eyes. On both sides of the white marble pathway that lead all the way towards the front doors of the white palace were two large pools of water, filled to the brim with lotus flowers and lotus leaves. The large, 40 metre length, rectangular pools were majestic in its beauty and peaceful in its natural serenity. Hinata could see large Koi fishes swimming among the mass of lotus flowers, leaves and vines. There was even a small pagoda built into the middle of one of the poos with a zigzagging bridge connecting it to the main marble pathway.

"This way please." The older boy interrupted Hinata's thoughts as he started to move across the marble pathway towards the central building. Focusing her eyes onto their guild, Hinata couldn't help but think the boy looked eerily similar to someone she knew.

"Ano. Um. Guide-san? Are you by any chance related to Kataichi Tori-kun?" Hinata finally realised that the older boy's kind grey eyes and spiky hair looked almost exactly like the miniature Gate Guardian's.

Without turning around to meet Hinata's gaze, the boy answered earnestly. "Ah, I am. I'm his older brother, Touya. (3)"

Hinata smiled as she realised she had not made a fool of herself by assuming too much. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Kataichi Touya-kun." She bowed sincerely, but noticed immediately that Touya's shoulders stiffened at her address.

"Please don't call me by that name. Touya is all you need to address me." The older boy answered back rather quickly.

A little annoyed at the boy's rudeness towards Hinata, Neji couldn't help but butt in. "Hey, she was just being nice. And anyway, why shouldn't we acknowledge your clan name as the Kataichi is one of the original and more powerful clans of the Kuunoki."

Touya flinched at Neji's snappish comments before answering back in a slow but hesitant tone of voice. "I am not a member of the Kataichi clan. I was exiled a long time ago, so please do not deride the clan by referring to me in such a manner. I am simply Touya, no clan name." The boy remained silent for the rest of the trip as the genins thought over his words.

It didn't take long for the group of genins to reach the doors of the White Palace. Calmly opening the doors once more, Touya turned around to address them. "Sabaku no Gaara-san, please step this way." Looking away from Gaara, Touya continued. "I'll have to ask you all to stay here and wait for my return. I won't be long in guiding Gaara-san to Ruri-sama. Please do not step away from the doorway, as there are many hidden seals around this palace that analyses foreign chakra signatures. If your chakra signature is detected as unknown and hostile, then it will activate some hidden traps as well as alert the hidden guards that are around the palace. Please heed my warning and stay here, do not move more than 5 metres from this spot." Finished with his words, Touya then lead Gaara away without another glance at the other genins. Soon, the two boys disappeared around one of the multiple corridors of white walls.

The rest of the genins only had to wait for another minute before Touya once again emerged from another corridor, this time, without Gaara by his side.

"Hey! Where's Gaara?" Ino immediately asked, worried about the red haired boy.

"Gaara-san is with Ruri-sama at this time, and I have orders not to disturb them. Please follow me again as I will lead you to Naruto-sama." Turning around without hesitation, Touya once again started walking forward towards yet another corridor.

Having most of their questions simply bounce off Touya without any answers, the other genins eventually kept quiet and just followed along.

Eventually, after walking up some massive marble stone staircases, the teenage Ninjas reached another set of doors, supposedly leading them to Naruto. Touya paused for a moment before knocking his knuckles against the wooden doors lightly.

"Naruto-sama. You have guests." Touya asked respectfully. From behind the door, a softly spoken 'come in' was uttered. Touya bowed towards the door before turning once more towards the genins.

"Naruto-sama is just behind this door, I shall be leaving you now." Without further ado, the strange, lanky turn turned back towards the way they came and walked off silently, leaving behind some bewildered genins.

"Well, I guess we just go in then, uh?" Kiba asked. Shrugging as no one answered back, he simply walked forward, grasp on the door handle firmly and pushed it open without pausing.

The room the genins found themselves in was like a vision of luxury. Everything was painted white, from white walls, to white shelves, tables and chairs, even the tiled floors and wooden roof. There were massive glass doors held by wooden frames separating the room and the balcony outside. There were also four large round pillars holding up each corner of the room. In several strange diamond-shaped tiles on the floor were large, black characters seemingly printed on them; some characters describing 'earth,' 'fire,' 'water,' 'wind,' and 'lightning'. Other characters included 'death,' 'life,' 'time,' 'fate,' and 'destiny.'

Among the white façade stood Naruto, leaning nonchalantly against one of the opened glass doors facing the balcony outside. The blond haired boy did not turn around to face them, his concentration focussed almost completely on what was occurring outside.

"Oi! Naruto! Long time no see and now you're ignoring us!" Kiba's rather sarcastic call fell on deaf ears, as Naruto didn't return with a barb of his own. "Hey! Are you even listening to me!?" The dog boy growled out in irritation two seconds later.

"Ah. I heard you the first time loud and clear." Naruto finally turned around to look at his so-called friends. It is then that the genins finally got a good look at the pale face of the blond haired teen, and what they saw surprised them. His eyes were tired and so very sad, as if the entire world weighed heavily upon his shoulders. His face was extremely pale, his stature lanky as he had lost much weight in the past few weeks. It definitely surprised the genins to find their friend so frail looking and it worried them too.

"What's wrong with you, dobe?" Sasuke's remarked caustically, hiding his anxiety at seeing his ex-teammate so depressed.

Hinata was more forward with her worry. "Are you okay, Naruto-kun?"

Shaking his head as if to clear away some unwanted thoughts Naruto gave them a weak smile in return. "I'm alright." Looking directly at Hinata's pinched face; Naruto's smile grew stronger a bit. "Sorry if I worried you, I'm really okay."

Not at all convinced, Hinata tried to pry the truth out of the blond haired boy once more. "What's wrong, Naruto-kun? Maybe I can help in some way, please tell me what's troubling you?" She encouraged, but Naruto could only glance away in hesitation.

"There's nothing you or I can do about this, Hinata-chan. Just let it go." Came Naruto's unbidden reply, as his gaze once more turned

incredibly sad, as if wanting to convince himself more than anyone else.

At the same time, only one floor down from Naruto's room, Gaara was lead behind Ruri and Kaga into the lower basement of the White palace. Gaara's passive eyes glanced around the large but empty catacomb in silent curiosity, wondering why Ruri and Kaga had lead him down here in the first place. Although the young Sand Nin was curious, this does not mean he was in any way suspicious of Ruri and Kaga's intensions. On the contrary, he owed them his very life, and would do anything for them. He trusts Ruri implicitly and if the Lady Oracle had asked for his head on a silver plate, he would do it without any hesitation. And that sort of fanatical devotion one rarely finds in a person like Gaara.

Finally, the Lady Oracle stops as she stood in the middle of the earthen chamber, before turning around and looking Gaara straight in the eye. "Gaara-kun. Do you trust me?" She asked in a soft voice, her eyes glittering in the shadowed room like precious blue jewels, although they held a slight essence of guilt in them, lowering their effects.

Gaara didn't pause for a single millisecond when he answered succinctly with a strong "Yes."

If possible, Ruri's eyes saddened even more for a second before they hardened again with resolve. "Good. Then let me say this. I am about to preform a heinous crime against you, Gaara of the Sand. Will you still allow me to do so without question, without doubt?" She asked in a aggressive tone of voice.

Again, Gaara replied with a resounding "Yes."

Tightening her left fist, Ruri paused for a moment to gather her thoughts before she finally uttered. "Good. Then I will tell you what I am about to do." Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Ruri looked once more towards Gaara's eyes with unwavering

determination, with a large amount of love and care hidden behind her gaze. "I will kill you... and then I will bring you back to life." She finally explained.

Gaara didn't take time to think about his own position; he barely even heard her words, his concentration focused solely on her eyes – her beautiful eyes. He simply nodded in acknowledge. Vaguely, as if he was in some kind of trance, Gaara noticed at the corner of his eyes when the door towards the chamber was opened once more, emitting none other than the leader of the Dokudes clan – Dokudes Ryoko holding a glass cylinder full of water with what appears to be a human hand inside. With his attention focussed solely on Ruri, Gaara didn't even notice when Kaga's shadow suddenly enveloped him within its grasp, swallowing him whole into a dark abyss of eternity. There, he fell into a deep sleep, not caring what happens to him as he knew he was in safe hands with Ruri.

Outside Kaga's protective Kage no Kekai, Kaga looked from Ryoko to Ruri with a vaguely stressed look. "Are you sure you want to go ahead with this? Ruri-sama?" He asked one last time.

Ruri only returned his look with a tight smile. "I have to, or else Gaara-kun will die either way."

Ryoko bowed to her mistress in respect. "Your arm is ready for transfusion, my lady."

Ruri nodded once more, her gaze turned towards the sleeping Gaara. "Then let's do this." Biting her thumb to draw a bit of blood, she pressed the bloodied thumb of her right hand against all five knuckles of her left hand, before she performed a long set of seals. With a quiet, almost scared voice, Ruri spoke: "Kuchiyose no Jutsu: Tenkun no Buki – Gojyo Fuuin Wa (Summoning Technique: Weapons of the Legendary Warriors – Five Part Sealing Rings) (4)."

A long moment of silence ensued before Naruto closed his eyes in concentration. Releasing a heavy sigh, he turned his attention once

more to his friends. Gazing blatantly at them, the Uzumaki heir tried to smile and change the subject. "So, what brings all of you here? It's not everyday I get visitors and stuff."

"Oi! Don't change the subject!" Kiba interrupted Naruto but before he could go further with his accusations, Hinata elbowed him in the rib to shut him up. Wincing at Hinata's hard glare, Kiba immediately quieten down a bit, not wanting to challenge his normally timid team mate's wrath.

"As I said earlier, Kiba; it's nothing really. Just let it go and move on to bigger and better things. Now, I'm guessing you guys have questions? Well, ask away, I don't have all day." Naruto's smile turned to a small smirk as he gazed proudly at Hinata's reaction to Kiba's accusation.

Neji coughed in the background. Once all their attentions were focused on him, he looked directly at Naruto and spoke up regarding their intentions. "We all decided to come to you or more correctly, the Lady Oracle, in asking for training advice. After all, those who can see the future would know exactly what we need to work on." The newly established Hyuuga heir spoke with a calm but superior voice.

Naruto folded his arms across his chest; looking up towards the roof he took a moment to give Neji's words some serious thinking. "Well. I suppose we would be a good place to start. However, my aunt is busy with something at the moment and she won't be free until the start of the tournament. As for me, well yes, I do have the ability to see the future. But Neji, just like fate does not dictate our destinies, the future is also not a straight line. You all have free will, and are perfectly capable of making your own choices. Depending on what you choice in the here and now, will lead you to a different future. It is not my place to tell you what you should become, that is your own choice to make. What I can do is guide you towards whatever your want yourself to be. Does that make sense?" Naruto shrugged sheepishly at the genins, but he noted that several of the teenage Shinobis looked towards him with a serious expression of their faces, as if they understood exactly what he was getting at.

Shrugging once more to dispel the uncomfortable atmosphere, Naruto stood up straighter. "So, who wants to be first?" He asked attentively.

"I would Naruto-kun!" Lee raised his hand immediately. "As you know, I am unable to use chakra effectively due to some anomaly in my chakra system; hence I am unable to use Genjutsu or Ninjutsu. I have pretty much mastered Gai-sensei's Taijutsu style, I'm now wondering if there is any area I can improve upon in order to grow stronger and out-perform even Gai-sensei." Lee did not mince his words and everyone could tell his absolute determination just from the serious tone of his voice.

Naruto nodded in understanding before he gave his own advice. "I understand Lee. I know that you can't perform Ninjutsu and Genjutsu on your own. However, have you ever thought about using seals in order to perform particular Ninjutsu *for you* . It is possible as you saw with Midou Kei's (the Grass Nin with the special elemental seal) techniques. On a different note, you can decide to become a weapons master in one specific weapon, or even encompass the weapon into your Taijutsu style (like that Rock Nin Rensa Ahiru). On a different note, your speed is impressive, but you lack brute strength. Touya, the boy who guided you all here, may seem thin and lanky in appearance, but when it comes to brute strength alone, he may well rival against Tsunade-sama. Those are the areas I would suggest you look into. Of course it's still completely up to you what you wish to work on. Once, you've decided which area to improve on now, I can probably tell you who (in the Kuunoki) would be the best person to speak to. Understand that if you do approach any Kuunoki Nin I recommend, they have the choice of rejecting you, and even if they accept, they are NOT taking you as apprentices. It is completely up to them what they teach you and you have no say in the matter."

The rest of the genins nodded in understanding, before the next person spoke up, wanting some advice on their own improvement. "What about me, Naruto-kun? I know that I rely too much on my

weapons, but I really don't have much talent anywhere else." Tenten called out from beside Lee.

Naruto frowned slightly in concentration before he worded his answer carefully. "Remember Tsubame from the Stone – she has a bloodline ability that can manipulate metallic objects. If you meet up with that kind of Shinobi, there's a hundred percent chance you will lose. I would suggest learning some Ninjutsu that can be used in conjunction with your weapons. Same thing with Genjutsu; you may never be good enough to cast them, but at least you should be able to recognise and break them. On a different note, you might want to find out what elemental nature affinity you have. If you're a wind elemental affinity, then that would help you with your weapon's sharpness – basically it's ability to cut; earth elemental affinity will make your weapons incredibly hard and unbreakable. The only person I can think that would be able to help you is Ryuuji Kenshin (5), Katana's (one of the Gate Guardians) father."

Tenten frowned, not recognising the name. "I don't remember that name." She muttered hesitantly.

"That's because Kenshin is a bit of a hermit himself. He was once the most renowned swordsman in the world, before the formation of the 7 swordsmen of the Mist that is. He originated from Grass country, but after the deaths of his wife and child, he became a wandering vagabond before stumbling upon the Hidden Air village and slowly settling down here. Katana is actually Kenshin's adopted son." Naruto explained nonchalantly, all this information was old news to him.

"Really? Now I understand why Katana-san was so fast with his sword." Lee piped up in astonishment. "He must have trained really hard under his father."

Naruto frowned at Lee's assumption. "Actually, Kenshin didn't teach Katana much other than the basics. Their styles are completely different. Katana focussed mainly on speed, it's why he was given the nickname "Flash Sword". Kenshin, on the other hand, focuses

more on fluidity and precision. The younger cuts by swinging his sword around, the older doesn't cut at all, but pierces into the heart of the matter. Both father and son are great swordsmen, no doubt about that, but their styles clash. Katana earned his right to become one of the Gate Guardians, but Kenshin has never really *trained* anyone seriously, so you will need to be persistent if you really want his help." He warned Tenten, who looked even more determined than before.

"Ano. What about me, Naruto-kun?" Hinata inquired in a soft voice.

"Hmm. That's a hard one. For both you, Hinata-chan and Neji, you're styles are so structured and confined to just Jyuuken, it's difficult to incorporate other techniques into your already established styles. I know that Hinata-chan has been learning Medical Ninjutsu – that would be a great addition to your arsenal. Further than that, I would suggest learning your own elemental affinity to see if you can incorporate that into your style of fighting as well. As for you Neji, you're even more constrained by your style of fighting. Unlike Hinata, you're completely focused on the use of Jyuuken only. I'll admit, it's an incredibly powerful Taijutsu style, but it leaves you vulnerable to ground attacks, even with the Byakugan's all seeing eyes. Not only that, it gives you very limited long range attacks which isn't good if you've got an opponent who's a long range fighter. As such, the only thing I can think of to help you is elemental chakra manipulation and chakra shape manipulation to boost your long range attacks.

Surprisingly, I can think of only one person in the entire Kuunoki that will be of much help to the two of you, and that person (ironically) is Jubei. Now, Hinata-chan should know exactly where to find Jubei and it shouldn't be **too** hard to convince him to train you both, but I can't guarantee that he would." Naruto finished answering while giving both Neji and Hinata a sheepish smile, rubbing a hand to the back of his head.

"Alright my turn! What have you to say about me and Akamaru?" Kiba exclaimed loudly, paying full attention to Naruto.

Looking over both dog and owner for a few seconds, Naruto then dispensed his advice accordingly. "The teamwork between you and Akamaru may need a little boost, but overall, it's pretty good. Traditionally, the Inuzuka ninjas don't need outside techniques like Genjutsu or Ninjutsu as they've created their own hybrid techniques for clan members only. As such, I don't think there's really any place for improvement technique wise. However, you may want to mature your mind more and give Akamaru the experience in fighting different opponents. Your skills will increase once you return to Konoha and learn from your mother and sister, but you can gain a lot of fighting experience here that you won't be able to outside. All I can say is read up more on strategy and tactics; and challenge more people to spars if only for training experience. You could talk to some of the members of the Oniyoubu clan to see if they have any information they can share with you regarding how they use their animal summons in battle. But other than that, sorry, I can't be of much more help." Naruto concluded with a shrug.

Kiba nodded seriously as he contemplated Naruto's words. "Yeah, that's pretty much what I thought. But you brought up a good point about the experience bit." Looking at his loyal companion, Kiba gave Akamaru a wild grin. "What say we kick some Cloud Nin's ass Akamaru, especially the one called Waisa Bado?" Akamaru yelped in excitement.

"Alright I'm next." Ino stepped forward and asserted herself in a very professional manner. "At first I really didn't want to do this, but after watching how you've dealt with the others, I'm sure you can find some way to help me as well. Look, after a lot of long hard thinking, I've decided that I'm not gonna specialise in any field." The other genins behind Ino looked at her in surprise. "I've learnt some sword techniques and medical Ninjutsu from Haku-kun, I also have my own family's special mind-control Ninjutsu as backup. But I figured that if I specialise too much in any field, I leave myself weak and defenceless in other areas, as demonstrated by my fight against Tsubame." Ino looked slightly depressed for a moment, before she took a deep breath and continued on. "As such, I've decided that I

would lean a bit of everything and work on them constantly until I've mastered them to the point where I can use it effectively no matter what situation I find myself in. So, can you tell me how I'm supposed to go about reaching this goal? (6)" Ino asked in a straight forward manner.

"I'm impressed by your resolve." Naruto gave Ino a proud grin before he continued with the rest of his explanation. "And I couldn't agree more. Someone of your background, talent and calibre would be a waist if you don't specialise too much. You should still continue in training with swords, medical Ninjutsu and your family techniques. But I think it would help you a lot by acquiring some long distance attacks and defensive jutsu as well. You're an offensive fighter forced into a support role most of the time, and it doesn't suit you at all. Sure, you're good at information gathering with your family techniques, and your also one of the medics on your team, but your inner personality calls for action. Have you ever thought about using chakra as a weapon in itself? I'm not referring to medical Ninjutsu here; I'm talking about chakra blades and chakra strings. Maybe those are some of things you might want to look into. Anyone in the Kuunoki can teach you about chakra strings and how to manipulate the shape of chakra to use as a weapon, so you can pretty much ask anyone to help you." Naruto concluded as he was truly happy to see Ino's delighted grin as she nodded back in agreement.

Standing silently being Ino and the rest of the Konoha Genins, Daiku finally raised his hand in question. "Hey. Naruto-san? You don't know me personally, but my name is Naja Daiku. I'm a Shinobi of the Hidden Snow Village. And well... since most of everyone else have had their fortunes pretty much told, I'm wondering if you can do mine as well? Or like, do you not know me enough to make a judgement?" Daiku hesitantly inquired.

"Ah. I do remember reading your report from Hikari (your proctor from the Chuunin Exams) regarding your skills and performance. Naja Daiku, heir to the small but newly restored Naja clan. Your family specialises in the use of ice Ninjutsu and Taijutsu attacks,

supported by the use of weapons. However, from what I understand it, you're Genjutsu skills are practically none existent. I'd suggest you work on that. I also suggest you look into chakra shape manipulation to see if you can change your elemental chakra into something that can be useful. Again, anyone from the Kuunoki would be able to help you regarding chakra shape manipulation. Other than that, you're pretty powerful in your own right." Naruto gave Daiku an encouraging smile, which was returned by Daiku simultaneously.

"Okay dobe. Looks like I'm last." Sasuke, the last of the eight genin present who haven't asked for advice yet, finally spoke up.

But unlike the other times, Naruto's encouraging smile disappeared altogether. Frowning slightly in deep thought, Naruto finally looked up directly towards Sasuke's eyes. "Sasuke. Due to the curse seal on your neck, very few people in the Kuunoki would be willing to talk to you, let alone train you. I won't beat around the bush; it'll be hard for you to learn any skills outside of the ones that Orochimaru would teach you. Because you still have the curse seal, basically, you're holding a part of his corrupted spirit inside you. This means that if you learn something that go against the curse seal's original intent, it will rear up and fight you. However, if you're learning directly from Orochimaru, the curse seal would do the opposite, enabling you to learn the skill much faster than normal." Naruto spoke in a deep, calm but serious voice.

Sasuke's cocky attitude immediately sobered, but he was determined for move forward no matter what. "I get it. But so what? Even if I have to train on my own, I'm still going to get stronger. Now, are you going to advise me on how to do that, or do I have to come up with a plan myself." The last Uchiha's black eyes almost glowed with pure resolve. His determination was absolute, there was no going back.

Releasing a sigh, Naruto spoke once more. "There's one person I can think of that might be willing to teach you because of your background. But you have to earn his interest first. He's unlikely to train just anyone, and if he does accept you, you'll be accepted as

an apprentice. As an apprentice, you will probably be asked to stay by his side until you're able to beat him yourself. This will take several years out of your life Sasuke, are you willing to commit the next 5 to 10 years?"

The Uchiha didn't even reply back with a verbal response. He only lifted an eyebrow back at Naruto as if stating 'of course, you need to ask?'

Giving his ex-teammate a wane smile, Naruto gave Sasuke one last chance to change his mind regarding this course of action. "You absolutely sure? He may ask you to give up your life, your name, your blood and even your life goal. What he demands is your absolute attention, with no distractions."

Slightly confused by Naruto's words, Sasuke none the less nodded in acceptance.

The wane smile slowly turned into a confident smirk on Naruto's face. "Okay, it's settled then. The rest of you guys can go off and try to find some place to work on your own training regime. Me and Sasuke are gonna go for a walk. I'll see you all later. Ja ne!" Naruto pushed his way through the genins, ignoring Kiba's indignant cry and Hinata's attempt at pulling on his sleeve. Quickly making his way to the door, Naruto turned around one last time. "There's nothing more I can do to help, the rest is up to you." Turning his gaze to the still confused Uchiha, Naruto caught his attention. "Hey Sasuke, hurry up. I'm gonna bring you to meet the guy I was talking about, and we better not be late." With those words, he stepped out of the room, leaving the Uchiha to scramble in order to catch up to him. The rest of the genins left in the room slowly dissipated, breaking up and moving away from one another in pursuit of their own goals. Only one person remained in the room, Hinata.

The ex-Hyuuga heiress looked down forlornly at the basket of bento boxes she had made for Naruto, only for the boy to disappear on her even before she could confess. Sighing heavily, she slumped onto a nearby chair. In hindsight, she should have followed Neji out the door

in search of Jubei. But right now, she just wanted some quiet time for herself. She just needed a short break (away from everyone) in order for her to wallow in her dejection and self-pity at how everything had not gone according to plan.

Entering another white coated room several hallways away from his original room, Naruto bowed respectfully to the old man that was standing with his back towards the two boys whom had entered his room with only a short knock.

"Katono-sama (7). It's an honour to finally meet you." Naruto called out respectfully, elbowing Sasuke into the rib until the last Uchiha also made an attempt to bow towards the old man. All the while, Sasuke was mentally bashing Naruto for the injustice of it all, as well as the overall confusion of the whole situation.

"Ah, you must be the new Uzumaki heir. Please help this old man's fading memory by introducing yourself, child." The old man turned around to look at the two boys. His smiling lids covered over his eerily red eyes. The man was short and quiet bold at the top of his head. However, from the sides of his head, long white hair trailed down behind his back. His eyebrows too were long and wily as it swept past the sides his face. Even the man's white moustache and beard was long – long enough to be tied at the middle of his chest. The man wore a billowing robe of warm earthen brown hue, with flame like patterns licking upon the man's large sleeves. He was old and (from what Sasuke could make out) quiet jolly. However, Sasuke just couldn't ignore the niggling feeling that he had met this old man before, but he just couldn't remember where and when.

"Uzumaki Naruto, son of Uzumaki Yuuki, nephew to Uzumaki Ruri and current Uzumaki heir. Pleased to make your acquaintance." Naruto bowed once more to the old man. Lifting a hand and indicating for Sasuke to take another bow himself, Naruto continued with the introductions. "And behind me is my teammate from Konoha, Uchiha Sasuke. I believe you both have met before." This comment surprised Sasuke more than he would like. He knew

instinctively that he had met the old man before but he still couldn't recall when.

"Indeed, I was impressed that the boy can so effortlessly carry my sins. I was surprised." The old man's reply jotted Sasuke's memory. He almost gasped when he realised the old guy at the top of the Forbidden Tower was the same man standing before him now. It was only yesterday that he had first met the enigmatic old man whom held the mysterious black box in his hand. The two men looked completely different even though their aura and voice was exactly the same. It seems the old man he had met yesterday had finally gotten his hair brushed and cut properly. With a new change of clothes, Sasuke could finally recognise the similarities between the two, but he kept his surprise to himself, not wanting to bring any more attention on his person.

"That's because the both of you share similar pasts." Naruto's sudden comment caught Sasuke off guard once more. And this time, you can literally see the cogs moving inside the Uchiha's mind, but all they came up with was blank.

"Oh, how so?" The old man asked once more. / *Naruto called him Katono-sama. I'll have to remember that.* / Sasuke thought to himself even though he mentally agreed with Katono's assessment. / *How the hell would the two of us have similar pasts?!* / The confused Uchiha wanted answers and he wanted them NOW.

"Sasuke is the only living Uchiha that is still loyal to Konoha. Almost 10 years ago, the entire Uchiha clan (a prominent clan within the Hidden Leaf) was wiped out, by their own clan heir – Uchiha Itachi, Sasuke's older brother. There are only 2 remaining Uchiha's alive in the world today and they are Sasuke and Itachi. Quite similar to your past, no?" Naruto's voice turned a little taunting as he explained their similarities, which caught Sasuke completely off guard.

"Indeed, disturbingly so." Katono's answer jolted Sasuke even more out of his comfort zone. He looked at the old man's sad expression with wide, horror filled eyes, wondering what this man had gone

through in his life time. But he needed reassurance; Sasuke needed to be sure that what he was currently hearing was the truth. That there was someone out there who understood him, and that he wasn't alone nor was he the first one to experience such horror.

"What do you mean, Naruto?" Sasuke's weak voice grated out with hesitation.

This time, it was not Naruto who answered, but Katono himself. "My clan was wiped off the face of the planet as well. Some 50, 60 maybe even 70 years ago now, I'm not quite sure. I'm the last one remaining." The old man answered despondently.

"I see." Sasuke's dead voice muttered, sharing his sympathies with the old man, but internally he also felt relieved that there was someone who could understand him.

"No, you don't see." Katono's voice ripped through Sasuke's musing like a knife through butter. Looking directly at Sasuke's black eyes with his own ruby red ones, Katono's voice took a sudden shift to a more malicious tone of voice. "Because unlike you, I am not the victim, child of Sharingan eyes."

"Uh?" Sasuke looked confusedly between Naruto's sad expression to Katono's serious face and back again, wanting... no needing more clarification.

"What I'm saying is that I am the one responsible for the death of my clansman. At the mere age of 14, I am the one who slaughtered all my brethren." Katono's deadened voice darkened the entire atmosphere in the room.

A long silence reigned supreme.

"How?... Why?..." Sasuke impulsively activated the Sharingan and glared hatefully at the old man as if he was staring at Itachi's face once more. Gritting his teeth in absolute fury, Sasuke growled lowly like a vicious animal. "How many people did you kill? How old were

there? Were they young, or old, babies, women and children? How could..." The rest of his sentence was cut off by Katono's answer.

"Over 250 people died that night, all killed by my hands. Of those 250, 96 were from my own clan, and the rest were other Kuunoki citizens whom I had slain in my madness. There were women, children, babies and the old. I did not discriminate and I showed no mercy. By sunrise the next morning, over 5 different Kuunoki clans were completely wiped out, including my own." Katono's monotone voice stated the facts in a deep, emotionless tone, as if numb of all experience. "The 'event' was recorded down as the *Kuunoki 5 clan genocide* ."

Sasuke's Sharingan eyes widened in shock at the old man's words; he simply could not believe his ears. This was bringing back nightmares of his own clan's massacre by Itachi's hands, but far... far worse. There was around 112 casualties in the Uchiha massacre, all of whom were related to him in some way. But in Katono's case, he murdered innocent people, babies even, from other clans as well. People whom had absolutely no contact to Katono were slain by the merciless man as well. All for what?

"Why?" The word was choked out of Sasuke's throat. He could not believe that he had (at one point) thought this old man could relate to his pain. Nothing could have been more wrong. This old man... this old man reminded him of Itachi in the worse way.

"Do not misunderstand, Sasuke!" Naruto's strong voice sliced through Sasuke's thoughts like a razor sharp blade. "Katono-sama is just as much a victim as he is responsible for the deaths of those people. More than 80 years ago, during my great-granduncle's reign, there was an uprising by 5 of the most prominent clans in the Kuunoki. As their rebellious ideas (about Democracy and Freedom) and support for their cause grew, the 7 Councillors decided to end their uprising in one fell swoop. Using their mind control ability, they took over Katono-sama's body, whom at the time was only 14 years old. With the child heir of the prominent Souzen (8) clan in their grasp, they murdered every single person in each of those 5 clans,

hence the name ' *Kuunoki 5 clan genocide* '. When they finally released Katono-sama's body the next morning, there were no survivors. And Katono-sama instantly gave himself up for punishment and locked himself into the highest level of the forbidden tower. For 80 years, he has stayed there in solitude via self-punishment. As you can see now, the truth is often not as straight forward as it once seems to be." Naruto's words were firm but neutral, non-judgemental in his attitude towards Katono at all.

Sasuke didn't know what to think anymore. He didn't know whether he could relate to such a situation. True, Katono had physically massacred all those people, just like Itachi. But he wasn't in control of his own body at the time. Does that mean it's not his fault? All those people, dead, and it's not his fault? Even though he was the hand that brought down their deaths? Sasuke didn't know. And right, he didn't even want to think about it.

A long silence followed in the wake of Naruto's explanation. That is, until the old man decided to follow through with the rest of what he had originally tried to say.

"I once asked you what colour were the eyes of death. And you told me... they were red." Looking directly at Sasuke with his own gleaming red eyes, Katono asked directly. "Tell me, do I remind you of him? The one who killed your kin? Is he a monster on the same scale as myself? Is there any difference? Tell me what do you see, boy?" His voice lowered as he spoke, until he simply whispered the last few words with a longing sadness.

"All I see before me now is a tired and sad old man." Sasuke stated bluntly, eyes never leaving Katono's. Sighing briefly, he looked away from the visage before him to glance outside the window in remembrance. "Itachi... was never like that. He was cold, enigmatic. No one ever truly understood him... Alone, and secretive. I had never seen him tire before. I had never seen him really sad; distant and disappointed yes, but never sad." He murmured as he brought forth the almost painful memories of the brother he had once loved, of the brother he had once idolised. His voice almost cracked as he

continued: "I... I practically worshipped the ground he walked on... I wanted... I wanted so much to be like him." Sasuke could feel tears sting on the sides of his eyelids but he refused to let them fall. Long ago, he had vowed that tears would not bring back the dead; that tears would not help him attain vengeance.

Katono then interrupted Sasuke's musings with another question, in a soft, almost sympathetic voice. "Killing the man you hate would not bring them back either. Had that been the case, I would have died a long time ago." Sasuke looked to Katono with wild eyes filled with grief, desperate for some understanding and guidance.

"I hated myself. I truly did. For a brief moment, I was a monster... and I murdered my parents, my siblings, my cousins, grandparents and my friends. Those visions still haunt my nightmares even now. At first, I didn't kill myself because I was offering my sanity as the price in self-punishment. I self-mutilated my body in various ways in atonement. But... in the end, nothing I could do was ever enough to satisfy me and to satisfy the ghosts that follow me." Katono's eyes turned dull as he remembered his first few years in that deep, dark cell filled with screams of pain and incoherent night calls.

"It wasn't until many years later, that I realised I was simply running away from the truth. No matter what I do, I will never be able to bring them back... and hence why I will never truly feel a level of peace – which is exactly what I craved more than life itself. I wanted forgiveness, I wanted atonement, I wanted peace. But I wanted them from people who will never be able to give them to me." The old man swallowed harshly as if to gulp back down his inner pain. He then looked to Sasuke with ever sad eyes. "The pain will never truly go away. But... we can't let that grief consume us either... for we owe it to the dead to live for them, to live in their stead. You may believe that they will never forgive you until you have avenged their death. But you are wrong. *They* will never be able to attain peace (even in death)... because **you** refuse to let them go."

Sasuke looked away and whispered softly. "I'm afraid... I'm afraid that I'll forget them... and then it will be as if they've never existed."

"As long as you hold on to their memories, they will never truly die." The old man gave Sasuke a kind smile this time. "I will forever carry the sins I had committed on that night, until my death and beyond. And I accept that. Those that perished will forever remain in my memories. In that sense, by living, I've become a live tribute to their existence. But I do not, should not, seek vengeance. I do not let grief take hold of me anymore. Because I know that, if I do, I would only cause more pain – to others and myself." Pausing to draw a deep breath, Katono concludes his speech with this final message: "Tell me Sasuke, are you truly going to kill your brother? Do you believe (truly) that you *can* kill your own brother? And if you did, what would it accomplish?"

Sasuke's eyes remained dull and his lips were sealed in silence. He could not answer that question simply because he truly didn't know.

Naruto sighed heavily, breaking the silence. Scratching the back of his head rather sheepishly, he spoke in a soft voice. "I didn't introduce you two just to hash out old wounds. On the contrary..." Looking directly at Katono's eyes, Naruto suggested in a calm voice. "Katono-sama. You are the last member of the Souzen clan, and the only person in the entire Kuunoki village that still hold knowledge on how to 'bend' the elements. It would be a shame if you brought all that priceless knowledge and skill to your grave with you." Directing his gaze at Sasuke, Naruto continued. "And Sasuke here needs to grow. He needs to find a way to escape his past, release himself from the chains that bind him to the past. More than that though, he needs to find himself. And I think your guidance would be the only thing able to help him, Katono-sama. Hence, what I propose is a master-apprentice relationship. Believe if or not, you two need each other, more than you would ever realise." With those words, Naruto nodded and then stepped out of the room, leaving the old man and Sasuke alone to make their decision.

After a long silence of contemplation, Katono finally spoke: "I will not train anyone who is tainted by a vile curse seal." He answered, ruby red eyes gazing softly at Sasuke. "But if you're willing to part from

the power provided by the curse seal, and you're willing to learn everything I will teach you through normal means – namely without the use of the Sharingan, then I am willing."

Sasuke's eyes widened when Katono mentioned his Sharingan. Tightening his jaw, Sasuke looked away from the old man. For so long, he had yearned for eyes like his brother – eyes strong enough to defeat any enemy. He had waited so long and depended so much on his Sharingan eyes, it seems preposterous not use it. The Sharingan is the bloodline limit of the Uchiha Clan, distinguishing them from the various other low level clans in Konoha. Without the Sharingan, Sasuke couldn't even consider himself a member of the Uchiha. It was impossible for him to part with his Sharingan eyes. Finally, Sasuke ventured with a question. "Why? Why must I suppress the use of my eyes? They are an important part of me, and I need to develop them to the fullest. I need them to defeat my brother."

Katono gave a heavy sigh as the boy didn't seem to understand him at all. "What I wish to teach you, you cannot learn through copying. Only hard work, trial and error will bring you proficiency in my art. On the other hand, I believe you rely too much on your clan's bloodline limit ability, that you ignore all other possibilities. The Sharingan is powerful, yes; but it is also corrupt. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. You must develop a mental strength and will to temper your ambitions, or else you will let these ambitions rule your life, leaving you nothing but a puppet to your own desires. Just as I was once the puppet of the 7 councillors (unwilling though I may be); you will become a puppet of your brother's manipulation whether you admit it or not. To break that chain of influence, you must find your own way... your own path."

Sasuke thought over the old man's words. It was true that he had been almost following in Itachi's footsteps diligently since forever. Hell, he almost betrayed Konoha and went to Orochimaru for power, just as Itachi had left Konoha and joined Akatsuki. It seemed the two brothers were more alike than they were willing to admit. But that still

doesn't the fact that he found incredibly difficult to accept not using his Sharingan eyes. Finally, Sasuke decided to ask for more details. "How?"

As if understanding Sasuke's predicament, Katono patiently explained. "The Nihoushi Fuuin no Jutsu (Twin Star Sealing System) (9). It's a seal used to lock away the chakra flow in certain sections of your body, like your eyes, or over a curse seal. Just as the Ichihoushi Fuuin no Jutsu (One Star Sealing System) locks away Naruto-sama's ability to summon the Tenkun no Bukis, the Nihoushi Fuuin no Jutsu will do similar things, but it also protects you from outside seals coming in and interfering with the star seal afterwards. For example, if we put this Nihoushi Fuuin on top of your curse seal and evil seal, then no other seals can be placed on top of it. Until the day, the Nihoushi Fuuin dissolves, which it will eventually or it could be accelerated, your Sharingan eyes will be released from the seal, enabling you to use it to the fullest once more. Now, the problem regarding the star seals is that they must be performed using Uzumaki blood, which means that only Naruto-sama or Ruri-sama has the ability to use it. They are also the only people in the world that can release it. Do you understand?"

Sasuke gave a hesitant nod before following on with the rest of his questions. "What... exactly will you be teaching me?"

Katono raised his wrinkly right hand, an instant later a small flame erupted from his palm burning brightly. "Fire Bending (10). It is a lost art in which the natural elements – Water, Earth, Fire and Air – are manipulated to do our bidding without the use of hand seals. When compared to the new age Ninjutsu, there are things that bending cannot achieve. However, there are also things that bending can achieve which Jutsu cannot. Think of them as an ancient art that no one can copy, and no one can imitate, and most of all, no one would expect – as I am the official last user of this lost art. Are you interested?"

Sasuke's eyes narrowed slightly. "Is that why you tested us for our elemental affinity before? To find out whom out of the genins were

compatible with you?"

"Yes." Katono smiled at Sasuke's intelligence. "The entire Souzen clan are affiliated with Fire. I myself, am affiliated with Fire and Lightning, just as yourself. Only those born with these affinities can utilise these gifts. Fire bending is an art whose strength comes from the breath, I will teach proper breath control, which will eventually lead you to extreme chakra control. It will be on the same level as those chakra manipulation used by the Dokudes clan. Do you think you are able to handle it? It will not be an easy walk in the park?" Katono warned.

Eventually, Sasuke gave a confident smirk, he had always loved challenges. "Bring it." He concluded, and so, the two – newly appointed master and apprentice – came to a decision.

"Ryoko! Hurry! She's completed the seal, we must stop the bleeding or else she'll die!" Kaga's anxious voice rang out within the catacomb as he rushed forward towards the swaying form of Ruri. Less than a second behind him, Dokudes Ryoko, the head of the Dokudes clan, rushed after him as well while holding a delicate cylinder in her hands.

Grabbing firmly and pulling the trembling Ruri into his arms, Kaga gently lowered her pale form onto the ground some metres away from the large puddle of blood staining the location where she had just stood mere minutes ago.

Gasping in pain, Ruri could feel the once white bandage wrapped around her eyes completely soaked in her own blood, the blood flow coming out of her eyes was so much that she could feel it dripping down her face. Gritting her teeth once more to stem her pain, she whispered to Kaga in an urgent voice. "How's Gaara? How is he? Was the seal successful? Tell me!"

Kaga didn't even glance back at the unconscious form of Gaara before he immediately replied back with "He's fine." Too worried over

the continual health of his mistress, Kaga simply couldn't bring himself to care about anything else but her welfare at this moment in time.

Use to Kaga's worry, Ruri snapped back in unrestrained frustration. "You haven't even checked!"

"It is okay, Aunt Ruri. Gaara's fine." Surprisingly, Naruto's voice called back to her. He's initial entry into the underground chamber had coincided with the completion of her sealing, hence why no one even noticed his presence. And although he was worried over Ruri's injuries, he knew that there was nothing he could do in order to help her. What he can do however is make sure her sacrifice wasn't in vain by checking up on Gaara. And as predicted, Gaara was fine. There wasn't even a scratch on the Sand Genin's body to indicate the trauma that had been done to him minutes ago. No one would be able to tell the difference, no one would ever know that just minutes prior, Sabaku no Gaara had died, and then was resurrected back to live. Non one would know except for the people in this very room, and they all knew that they would bring this truth to their graves.

Checking over Gaara one last time to make sure his initial examination was correct, Naruto then stood up and let the Sand Genin sleep away his exhaustion. Turning around to face his aunt, Naruto flinched at the amount of blood that was on the ground, lying right next to the greyish, already decomposing left arm that she had so roughly sawed off her body. Swallowing back down the bile from his stomach, Naruto tentatively walked around the large pile of blood and rotting appendage to gaze sadly upon his aunt, who was at the moment convalescing as Ryoko immediately stemmed the blood flow from the section above her missing left arm. After that, Ryoko quickly opened the watered cylinder she had been carrying around since the beginning of the sealing process, gently pulled out the pale, artificial, left-arm she had grown in her laboratories just for this occasion. Carefully joining the two ends of Ruri's missing arm against the artificial arm, Ryoko focussed a large amount of healing chakra into both appendages, joining and fusing the two into one

seamless continuation. The healing process was long and wrought with pain, as demonstrated through Ruri's continual groaning in suppressed pain. Slowly but surely, the new arm was reattached back to Ruri's body, leaving the Lady Oracle once more with two arms. However, due to the differing skin tone of the two sections (of the arm), one could still tell immediately that some sort of surgery had been performed (11).

Slowly calming down from her adrenalin rush, Ruri couldn't help but fall into unconsciousness as all that had transpired in the last half hour finally overwhelmed her traumatised body. The blood lost, the shock of severing her own appendage, coupled with the stinging sensation behind her eyes, followed by the painful attachment of a new arm, all of which combined simply took too much out of her. And if that wasn't enough, she had just finished the sealing of Gaara's life by using one of the most dangerous Tenkun no Bukis (Weapons of the Heavenly Warriors) – Gojyo Fuuin Wa (5 part Sealing rings) (12).

Seeing that his aunt was as recovered as she could be in her situation, Naruto nodded for Kaga and Ryoko to help transport her back to her room upstairs for recovering. Ryoko followed while carrying the unconscious form of Gaara. Once all four members left the room, Naruto was left with cleaning up the blood and getting rid of the evidence – namely his aunt's original arm, which was turning black now. Giving a heavy sigh, Naruto produced several Kaga Bunshins in order to do the cleanup for him. *He* certainly wasn't going anywhere near the cursed appendage.

/ Gojyo Fuuin Wa... the five part sealing rings. Each ring has the ability to seal away a certain aspect or facet of 'life'. One ring can seal away a person's emotions, leaving them feeling empty, lost, and incapable of feeling even pain. One ring seals away a person's memory, taking away the right to think, leaving them as vulnerable as a baby. One ring seals away the body's movement, while the mind is alive and active; the body is unable to move – leaving them trapped in a comatose form for all eternity. One ring seals away the spirit or soul; what is a body without its soul, a mindless moving

entity with no purpose in life, and incapable of reincarnating. The last ring, seals away your life, turning your body, mind and soul into mere stone – forever unchanging, eternal damnation. What a terrifying Tenkun no Buki. / Naruto couldn't help but think to himself and shuddered in fear.

End.

(1) Refer to Faith in Humanity (the prequel to this story) chapter 7

(2) Refer to Restoration of Faith chapter 10

(3) Not really an important character, he'll pop up once or twice as a guide for the genin's training, but mostly he's not gonna be playing an important role. For those interested however, go to Kataichi Tori's (one of the Gate Guardians) character profiles on my website and you'll be able to understand why Touya was kicked out of his clan. I've also got a new picture of him on my profile's page, go and have a look.

(4) Yes! Finally I get to use another Tenkun no Buki in my story. Um.. you'll understand later why Ryoko needed to be there.

(5) Yup, you guessed right. This character is pretty much all inspired by the character Himura Kenshin, from the anime/manga Rurouni Kenshin .

(6) Like Sakura, I'm making my version of Ino much more dedicated to the Shinobi-field and not such a 'beauty-queen.'

(7) Sorry, forgot to mention. The new OC – Katono – you can find a picture of him on my website – follow the links on my profile's page. Same with Touya (Tori's older brother) – links on my profile's page.

(8) AH! I couldn't think of anything else, so I copied the name from Avatar – the Last Airbender . At one point, I even thought about

using 'Zuko', or 'Iroh' or even 'Ozai', but in the end, I think 'Souzen' suits best.

(9) I've got a pic of this seal uploaded onto my website – links are on my profile's page.

(10) That's right! I'm having Sasuke turn into Zuko from Avatar: the last Airbender . Although, Katono will not be as lovable as Uncle Iroh.

(11) Think of the character "Wrath" from Full Metal Alchemist – the animated series and you'll know what I'm talking about. By the way, I've got a picture showing the scene an instant after the sealing has been completed. Please go to my website to have a look, the links are on my profile's page.

(12) For those interested in reading more about the Tenkun no Buki's and what they do, go to my website, links on my profile's page.

I'm actually not gonna apologise for the long wait this time, as I have a perfectly logical reason for not posting this chapter in a long while. The reason is work. I'm currently being overworked, underpaid, took 3 different 2-day courses in the last few weeks. We also had about 10 or so people leaving my organisation and obviously I had to help out with the work load, leaving me even MORE overworked. I've got gym straight after work, giving me an opportunity to vent my frustrations out on machines and a punching bag. By the time I get home, I have enough energy to eat, check my email then go to sleep. Suffice to say, I only have time on weekends to update this story, and even then it has to compete with priorities like grocery shopping. So yeah, I've been a very busy person lately, so don't expect much quality stuff coming out of my overworked brain.

On one final note, hope you liked this chapter; I know it's much slower than any other chapter but I'm ready for some down time myself – hence why this chapter reflects my mood. Remember to review please! I like hearing suggestions for future plot stuff, questions or even statements on what I did right.

Incidents

For those of you who follow the latest release of Naruto manga, you will know that the name of the Forth Hokage has finally been revealed, and that he IS Naruto's biological father. Not only that, but they also mentioned Naruto's biological mother's name as well – Uzumaki Kushina.

Now! How the hell am I going to incorporate this new revelation into my story, because I'd like to keep as many of the Naruto characters as close to IC (in-character) as possible, without jeopardising my story's plotline.

Okay, I'm willing to conform the Yondaime's name to match his real name, as revealed by the manga. This means that I'm going to have to go back through all my chapters and amend all the mentions of 'Kazama Arashi' to reflect his true name 'Namikaze Minato'. There is only one mention of his name I have found anyway, and that's on Chapter 1 of Restoration of Faith. If there are any others that I have missed, please inform me asap.

Unfortunately, I've come to the conclusion that I CANNOT incorporate Naruto's true mother into my story.

Why, you ask?

Because:

- In my story, Naruto's mother must be the sister of Ruri and therefore a member of my made-up Hidden Air village (not someone who originated from the whirlpool country)
- Not only that, but (in this story) I need Naruto's mother to be blonde, and a proper lady. Not (as described in the manga) a

Red haired tomboyish female that is constantly 'jabbering'.

- It's too hard!!!! T.T (While I don't have that many mentions of Yondaime's name, I did mention a lot about Yuuki, and to change the name now is a lot of work)

- Lastly, I LIKE the name 'Yuuki' better than 'Kushina' so DEAL WITH IT!

Please do NOT attempt to argue with me on this point as I have no wish to change my mind. If this matter has been settled, please continue to read on.

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness.
Chapter Thirty-four: Incidents

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" Demon's talk "/ Thoughts /, "Speech", ' Speech emphasis ', (FLASHBACK), Titles , (*Author's interruptions*)

Warning: OOCness. This chapter will be filled with mini incidents that all lead to the future. Hope you enjoy.

Chapter 34

"What are you doing down there?" Shikamaru's drawl voice called from above.

Temari's head snapped upwards towards her possible rescuer. "Oi! Can you get me out of here!?" She completely ignored his original question and put up one of her own.

Shikamaru took another glance at the one and a half diameter circular hole that went straight down some twenty to twenty five metres, before settling once more at Temari's blond head just barely seen from the surrounding darkness. "I ask again, what are you doing down there?"

Temari gave an indignant huff. "I fell, damn it! What do you think?! Hurry up and help me, or get the out of here NOW!" She demanded in a fierce voice.

"Why can't you use your fan to get out?" Shikamaru asked once more, finding it too troublesome.

"Because I can't open the damn thing in such a tight space!?" Temari screamed out in frustration. Having finally decided that the lazy Leaf Nin wouldn't lift a single finger to help her out of her predicament, she simply huffed once more in frustration before turning away from his lazy gaze.

Giving a heavy sigh, Shikamaru muttered under his breath. "How troublesome." He then performed a series of hand seals before the shadow upon his feet travelled into the hole that Temari was currently trapped in. Once inside the dark earthen hole, Shikamaru manipulated his shadows to form thin vines. These vines then wrapped around Temari's form (totally ignoring her indignant shout) and pulled her up and out of the whole. Releasing his jutsu after dropping Temari onto the surface of the earth, Shikamaru gave another tired sigh. "So troublesome." Shaking his head, Shikamaru quickly noticed that Temari didn't look as uninjured as she first appeared. In fact, part of her clothes had ripped in places, showing small gashes here and there, a large bruise was also forming on her

right ankle, indicated a broken or fractured ankle. The girl wouldn't be able to walk on that.

Slumping his shoulders with yet another sigh, Shikamaru turned his back to the sitting Temari and bent down. "Here, get on my back." He muttered in a lazy voice.

"Wha... what!?" Temari shot back in confusion.

"Your ankle is either broken or fractured. You won't be able to walk on that, so I'm gonna have to carry you, now come on." Shikamaru answered tiredly.

Pulling an indignant face, Temari couldn't help but snort back unladylike. "I'm fine." Just to prove her words, she tried to stand up on her injured ankle, only to wince in pain and slump back down again, rubbing on the injured appendage.

"How troublesome." Shikamaru sweat dropped at Temari's childish behaviour. It took a few more minutes of encouragement and a few more shouts of pain before Temari finally relented and got on Shikamaru's back, which only resulted in Shikamaru complaining that carrying both Temari and her fan were very troublesome and heavy.

"Shut up! You're the one who offered to carry me in the first place. Of course you're gonna have to carry my battle fan as well!" Temari replied sarcastically, leaving Shikamaru no way to manoeuvre his way out verbally.

"Still doesn't change the fact that it's too troublesome." Shikamaru followed up with his own comment.

An angry vein bulged upon Temari's forehead. "Are you saying I'm heavy?" She asked dangerously in a low tone of voice.

Suddenly sensing danger, Shikamaru quickly re-evaluated his situation. "That's not what I mean at all." Silently, Shikamaru sweated

nervously, hoping that Temari won't give him a knuckle sandwich on the head. Unfortunately, fate was against him.

After giving the Leaf Ninja a nice punch in the head (resulting in Shikamaru crying out in pain), Temari finally forgave him for his ungentlemanly behaviour towards her. "Well, why the hell were you out here looking for me anyway?" She asked in curiosity.

Frowning at the slight bump on his head, Shikamaru thought about ignoring the question until he sensed that Temari wasn't about to let him get away with silence. "It was market day today. The Kuunoki villagers allowed some Sand traders to enter and leave the village. Of course, architecture designs of buildings made in the desert as well as plans on how to safeguard high end technology from the elements of sand and wind were all snatched up by the Dokudes and other villagers. However, I also found some interesting Shinobi items that I thought might be useful to us. One of those items I thought would be a great addition to your arsenal so I came looking to give it to you. Unfortunately, I couldn't find you in the village, so I went around to the Wind farm and found Akiko-san instead. She told me to come here."

Upon hearing the name of her new master, Temari could feel her eyebrow twitch in agitation. However, Shikamaru's voice brought her out of her musings once more. "So, you still haven't explained to me how you fell into a perfectly round hole like that one."

Grimacing at her memories, Temari thought that it wouldn't serve any purpose to lie. "That witch of a master pushed me down that hole, and told me to use wind chakra to get back out. However, the whole was so small I couldn't even open my fan, how the hell was I suppose to get out. And not to mention, wind's nature is to cut. If I cut the hole I'm either making the hole bigger or deeper, which doesn't help me get out!" She complained in frustration.

"Even though wind's nature is to cut, but that doesn't mean it's the only thing it can do. Wind is a versatile element. Like water, it is flexible, can be condensed or released. It can spin and drill, or slice

and cut. I think Akiko-san was trying to get you to think outside the box. Maybe you could have focused the wind behind your feet to swirl like a mini-tornado, pushing yourself up the hole or something. Another thing I think she wants you to realise is that you rely too much on that battle fan of yours. Something that large and heavy is great in certain battles, but it can be a hindrance in others." Shikamaru's calm voice slowly smoothed over Temari's irritation, making her realise that there was a lesson to learn from all of this.

After several more minutes of walking, Shikamaru finally reached the town centre. He ignored all passer-by's and other buildings, heading directly towards the Dokudes main house, where he knew Sakura was still studying at. "Why are we going to the Dokudes Main Branch houses?" Temari asked curiously, coming out of her contemplation on Shikamaru's words.

"Sakura is the only medic I know willing to heal your wounds without complaint. I could have gone to any of the Dokudes clan members but I'm not sure they would give us the time of day." Shikamaru answered as he walked towards the main door to the building. Knocking upon its surface twice, the door was opened by a minor member of the Dokudes house. Shikamaru bowed (with Temari still on his back) and spoke politely. "Greetings, I am looking for Haruno Sakura. I wish for her help in healing an injured friend of mine."

The minor Dokudes member nodded and directed Shikamaru to the basement Library before departing away from the two. Following the man's directions, it didn't take Shikamaru long to find the doorway down towards the basement, and he soon found himself knocking against said door.

It didn't take long for Sakura to open the door, she was looking for an excuse to leave the dusty library anyway. Upon taking one look at Temari's injured form, Sakura immediately came to the conclusion that the Sand Konoichi was injured and ushered the both of them to another room.

The new room looked like an in-house medical facility, all white with medical utensils covering most of the multiple table's surfaces. They even had high tech x-ray machines and other scans, as far as Shikamaru could tell. Gently manoeuvring the injured girl onto a thin but firmly padding bed, Shikamaru moved away to allow Sakura to do what she does best, healing.

"Now, let's see. You've got a nice fracture in your ankle that has since swelled up, probably from you putting on too much weight on it or twisting it in some way, but the rest of the your cuts and injuries aren't that severe. So I'm gonna work on your ankle first before moving on to the rest." Sakura listed off even while her mind was busy cataloguing how many minor bruises were on the girl. Finished with her mental preparation, Sakura got right to it and started concentrating healing charka into Temari's injured ankle.

Deciding to distract Temari from the pain of Sakura's healing, Shikamaru took out a small, box from one of his pouches. "Here. This was the thing I thought you would find useful."

Taking the thin but long box from Shikamaru, Temari turned it round and round for a bit; frowning curiously at it like a kitten would a new toy. Shaking the box, Temari was a little disappointed that she couldn't hear anything. Could the box be empty?

Standing in front of her, Shikamaru sighed tiredly. "Just open the damn thing!" He snapped rather uncharacteristically.

Sticking her tongue out at Shikamaru childishly, Temari opened the box tentatively, and gasped at what was held in insider. There were two hand held fans, when unfolded each depicted a beautiful landscape with swirls of patterns around it. As an experienced Wind user, Temari could instantly tell these weren't normal fans at all, these were battle fans.

"The one on your right with the picture of flames has a seal embedded into the paper of the fan. This seal will convert any chakra pushed into the fan to create fire. This means that if you focus your

chakra into that fan and perform your normal Kamaitachi, you won't be creating wind blades, you'll be created flaming blades that pass through the air in exactly the same ways as your Kamaitachi. Basically, it will merge your normal wind chakra elemental affinity with fire elemental affinity." Shikamaru explained, grinning slightly at the awed look upon Temari's face. "The one on your left, depicting the water fall, also has a seal embedded inside it, but this one converts to water elemental affinity, allowing you to maybe create ice blades. In essence, if you fight with both battle fans by your side, it'll be as if you had three elemental affinities instead of just one." He concluded smugly.

"Oh MY GOD! THANK YOU SOO MUCH!" Having her ankle completely healed by Sakura, Temari didn't feel any pain when she suddenly jumped up off the bed and pulled Shikamaru in for a tight hug. "These are SOOO COOL! I love it! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" Jumping up and down like a hyper teenager, Temari never noticed Shikamaru gasping for breath and trying desperately to claw away from her. That is, until he suddenly slumped down in unconsciousness due to lack of breath. Immediately releasing the poor, suffocated boy, Temari lifted an eyebrow in confusion. "Eh?"

"I think you squeezed him a bit hard, Temari-san." Sakura's mouth twitched into an amused smile before helping the sand girl move the unconscious boy onto the bed.

"This is gonna sting, okay." Without any further warning, Naruto concentrated a large amount of chakra onto the newly drawn blood seal on top of Sasuke's shoulders. "Nihoushi Fuuin no Jutsu! (Twin Star Sealing System) (1)"

Gritting his teeth painfully, Sasuke somehow managed to hold back the scream of pain as he felt a sheering pulse of energy burn on his shoulder, centring on the heaven curse seal that Orochimaru had 'gifted' him some months ago. Although Naruto's new sealing didn't hurt as much as Kakashi's sealing, it still HURT none the less, and not to mention, Naruto has to do two – one for Orchimaru's curse

seal, and the other for his precious Sharingan. Luckily, the process didn't take long at all, and in a few seconds, the seal was complete and Sasuke felt an immediate cut of chakra flowing in his body. It was a strange feeling as Sasuke had never even noticed that the evil chakra had continuously escaped Kakashi's seal (even though it was a minute amount at any given time) and mixed with his own. But now that the new, more powerful seal is in place, he really felt as if his body had been purified somehow, his chakra just felt cleaner.

"Okay, one down, another one to go." Wiping the sweat away from his forehead, Naruto walked around the slightly shaky form of his former team mate, moving from behind the Uchiha heir, to in front. Biting his index finger once more to allow for the blood flow, Naruto took his time in crafting the second seal onto of Sasuke's bare forehead. In silence, Naruto worked slowly, spending several minutes to ensure that the seal was properly written and that there were no mistakes. Once he was confident in his work, Naruto stepped back once more. "This time, the pain will probably knock you out as it directly connects with your bloodline, it'll hurt a lot more also. So remember not to bite your tongue, scream if you must."

Naruto's last warning didn't come anywhere near the reality of the ripping pain that spread all through out Sasuke's body following the blonde's last words. Starting from his forehead, Sasuke felt his brain burn from an instantaneous intense heat. And then that blinding heat travelled down his head, neck, shoulders, chest and down to his legs. He felt as if he had been plunged into a live volcano and then thrown into the bottom of a frozen lake. The extreme temperature sensation traumatised Sasuke's already shocked body and it was no wonder that the boy quickly fell into unconsciousness. He didn't even have the time to scream before darkness overwhelmed him.

After a few moments, Naruto staggered away, leaning on his knees as he gasped for breath in tiredness. "It is... done." He continued to breathe heavily even while his eyes turned to gaze at the standing form of Katono. "He is now... officially... yours."

Katono bowed down to the Uzumaki heir. "Thank you, Naruto-kun. I really can't thank you enough for giving me this change to atone for my sins."

Naruto shook his head slowly. "It's not me that you should appreciate. All you need to do now is watch out for your new apprentice, help guide him out of the darkness he had willingly drowned himself in."

"I intend to do so." Katono answered resolutely, even as he stepped forward and slowly lifted the unconscious Uchiha into his bony hands. Even though the man was very old, it was easy to tell that his physical abilities had not suffered from that much damage. He was still strong and very much capable of fighting. Stabilising the additional weight of the unconscious boy in his arms, Katono bowed awkwardly once more before turning around and walking towards the door, intending to leave the room.

"That is all I'll ever ask." Naruto muttered softly under his breath as he watched the man carry his ex-team mate out the door.

"So, lil' doggy boy wants to battle it out with the big boys, huh? What? You want to impress some girls, is that it?" Waisa Bado taunted once more as he languidly walked around the pissed off form of Kiba and Akamaru.

"Okay, that's it! No one gets away with calling me 'little' anything! Let's get 'im, Akamaru!" Kiba shouted out while Akamaru barked enthusiastically in agreement. Kiba then shot a soldier's pill into his faithful dog companion's open mouth. Akamaru, having consumed the red soldier pill, its fur soon turned a wild red in colour. Jumping upon his master's back in a crouched position, Kiba quickly performed one of his favourite Jutsu. "Juujiin bunshin! Gatsuuga!" Kiba and the other Kiba clone (Akamaru) launched themselves towards their other opponent with no hassle or fanfare.

"Is that really all you can do dog breath!?" Bado taunted even as he charged up his Lightning armour and chakra field. This time, he wasn't going to waste time playing around, he was going to knock this stupid leaf Nin out clean and fast. Jumping out of the way from one of the incoming Kiba clones, Bado then enhanced one of his fists and infused it with lightning. Launching his fist forward, he punched the second Kiba clone right in the centre of his rotation. The lightning travelled through the body of the Kiba clone, shocking his nervous system and firing up his blood. Even while Bado was slammed into and pushed backwards by the collision of the two boys, with his lightning armour and chakra field up, he wasn't as badly hurt as he could have been.

The Kiba clone however, did not come out so lucky. In the instance after slamming into Bado, the Kiba clone dispersed into smoke, revealing itself to be Akamaru.

"Akamaru!" Kiba yelled even as he rushed forward, grabbed onto his precious dog and jumped back just in case Bado was going to follow through with more assaults.

"Heh. A one-hit knockout. God! You Leaf Nins are so bloody WEAK! How did you ever win the Second Great Ninja war in the first place!? Konoha must be so full of useless genins that they're getting fat due to not overworking them!" Bado openly mocked as he dragged himself to his feet, his body already healing the minor injuries he had attained during his previous tumble.

"Hey! Who are you calling fat!" Chouji's sudden voice called out from an open doorway of one of the dormitories. Having been completely preoccupied with trying to awaken Akamaru and snarling threateningly at Bado, Kiba hadn't noticed Chouji's presence until the chubby boy's voice rang out into the open.

"I'm calling YOU fat! You fat ass!" Bado paid no heed when he insulted anyone and everyone. He simply tells it as it is, without remorse.

Growling in anger, Chouji looked furious at Bado's words. "That's it! You're going down!" Putting his chips carefully away, Chouji stomped forward like a giant on a mission. Standing some distance away from the arrogant Cloud Nin, Chouji quickly enlarged his hand and punched forward with his massive appendage. "Bubun Baika no Jutsu!"

Bado was just getting ready to jump away from the massive fist when suddenly; another genin jumped into the ring and disrupted his fight. Someone's hand abruptly appeared out of no where and grabbed onto Chouji's fist, holding it so tightly that Chouji couldn't pull it back. Kageru's impassive form stood perfectly still in front of Bado, her eyes however, glared coldly at the now sweating Chouji.

"Hey! Don't interrupt my fight when you're not wanted, snake-face!" Bado insulted straight at Kageru's face, not even thanking her for stopping Chouji's deadly fist at all.

Kageru completely ignored Bado's taunts and focused her eyes sole on the plump Leaf Nin. She spoke in an icy tone of voice. "You will die."

While Chouji felt a chill run down his spine at the deadly Sound Nin's threat, yet another genin stepped in to interrupt. "Hey hey! People! Just chill!" Daiku tried his best to lower the tension in the air between Chouji, Kageru and Bado, but to no avail. Coupled with Kiba and the now reawakened Akamaru wanting revenge at Bado, Daiku suddenly found himself placed in the centre of a war game with no way to escape.

Standing up straight, Kiba and Akamaru readied themselves to perform one of their greatest techniques. Running forward and jumping up from a near by tree trunk, once both the boy and dog were directly over the irritating Cloud Nin and the dangerous Sound Nin Kiba called out to Akamaru. "Now! Akamaru." Akamaru acknowledged his command with a bark before releasing all his urine on top of Bado and Kageru's head before jumping away towards his master again, completely ignoring Bado's indignant shout.

Landing on another large tree branch with Akamaru atop his head, Kiba cheered. "Hehe, here's our revenge. First stage – Dynamic Marking, Complete! Now on to the next stage." Performing his seals, Kiba manipulated his Chakra to finish the Jutsu. "Inuzuka Ryuu Combi Henge! (Inuzuka Beast Combination Transformation)" A large smoke erupted from the location of Kiba and Akamaru.

As the smoke cleared, there stood a HUGE two headed white dog in their place, with jaws open showing very sharp teeth and slobbering everywhere with their saliva. / *SOUTOUROU (Two Headed Wolf) complete!*

"Shxt! Now that's a big ass dog! And a mutant too, if I've ever seen a two-headed one!" Bado's sarcastic mouth knows no bounds. Infuriated by the words, Kiba and Akamaru (now in their new Soutourou form) never heeded Daiku's desperate calming words before launching themselves at Bado. / *GAROUGA! (Double Wolf Fang)* / The two headed dog jumped off its perch, spun around at incredible speed, creating a super spin and a deadly spear aimed at piercing its intended target, which it did.

Following the scent of Bado and Kageru, Kiba wasn't surprised when the two opposing genins immediately separated, but since he couldn't see them anyway, he decided to follow one of the scents only, mentally hoping that the one he was pursuing was actually Bado instead of Kageru as the Cloud Nin truly made his blood boil. Smashing face first into what he could only assume as his prey, Kiba and Akamaru spent several seconds just drilling into their opponent's flesh and body, before finally slamming their enemy into the heart of a tree trunk, drilling the person further in until he or she completely meshed into the tree. Finally done with their attack, the two-headed dog jumped backwards to look at their accomplishment. To their surprise, the form they had been drilling against suddenly burst into a cloud of smoke. / *Kawarimi? They were able to perform a kawarimi even in those circumstances!? /*

Some distance away, a crunch was heard before Kiba and Akamaru's head instantly swirled towards the sound. What they saw

was a severely battered and bruised Bado, gasping tiredly and leaning against a tree. / *Yes! We showed him what we're made of!* / The owner and pet thought to themselves when they were suddenly pulled out of their musings as they heard a scream from the side lines. Looking back towards where they had heard the scream coming from, both Kiba and Akamaru suddenly paled as they saw the row of destruction following in their attack direction, spanning all the way from the genin dormitories, right through the Kaiba family buildings and landing some where near the Ryuuji/Kazeha households. Suffice to say, in that one attack, they've destroyed several trees, one bridge, as well as crumbled a few buildings and monuments in their way.

"You bastards! You've destroyed our ROOMS WITH EVERYTHING STILL INSIDE IT!!!!" Hell hath no fury than Reiko without her make up or Saporu without her sake. Let's just say the once small spar turned into an all out war between the various genins.

"How is she?" Naruto asked quietly from the opened doorway, looking rather forlorn towards the resting figure of his pale aunt. Taking a few tentative steps into the room, Naruto quietly shut the door behind him.

Ruri was lying on the plain white sheets of a rather large bed. Her skin was very pale due to the previous day's trauma that had been inflicted upon her as well as the massive amount of blood loss that she had suffered. Her eyes were still bleeding now and again, even a full day's rest; hence why they were still covered by a cloth. Not only that, but she was suffering from the side effects of using the Tenkun no buki – a severe high fever.

The black clad form of Kaga, who had been sitting diligently next to Ruri's bed for however many hours since the sealing finished, looked towards Naruto with tired eyes. "The fever will break soon, Ryoko says she'll be fine once she has. She just needs plenty of rest to recuperate. In fact, she probably won't be able to move around much

until a month later. And then we have that tournament to organise..." Kaga sighed in tiredness, truly feeling his age at this moment in time.

"Jubei and the others will handle the tournament. If need be, you can probably just send look-a-like clones in your stead. I'd really feel much better if she stayed in bed longer than a month. That *tenkun no buki* is dangerous, no matter what the circumstances." Naruto moved his gaze from his unconscious aunt to Kaga, his eyes never wavering in sympathy and understanding.

Kaga gave a short chuckle in response. "As if she would listen to reason... You're both alike in that sense; too stubborn to know what's good for you."

Naruto shrugged sheepishly at Kaga's words, knowing that it was the truth. Before he could defend himself with a retort however, he was interrupted by a hurried knock on the door behind him.

"Naruto-sama." The lanky form of Touya opened the door and bowed lowly. "There has been a disturbance in the town square involving the outside genins. The gate guardians have already apprehended these trouble makers but they are awaiting your judgement. That is, before the 7 high councillors take interest in this situation."

Naruto frowned in slight anger, hating the fact that he had been disturbed when he came to visit his ill aunt. "Fine." He snapped rather aggressively. "Show me to them." He ordered in a demanding voice. Touya bowed once more before starting to move.

"Wait a minute, what exactly did the genins do?" Kaga called out, not even moving a centimetre away from his mistress and charge.

"It started off as a spar between two opponents, but led to several more people jumping into the scene. Eventually, it became an all out brawl, resulting in some property damage." Touya answered, and if possible, Naruto's face darkened even more.

"Let's go." Naruto nearly growled the words out. He had really wanted to spend a couple of quiet and peaceful days without worrying, and now he found himself needing to administer pain and punishment, not exactly a good start to his day at all.

Naruto's severe face looked beyond angry, he was furious. Having had a look at the amount of damage caused by the genin's so-called spar turned public brawl, Naruto could not help but feel disgusted and disappointed at their childish, moronic behaviour. Not only would he have to deal with the wrath of the Kuunoki people's whose homes were destroyed, but he had to dish out proper levels of punishment as well as deal with the imminent threats of the 7 high councillors if they believed his punishment wasn't enough. It was turning out to be one of the worse days of his life. And on top of all this, he was still worried over his aunt's welfare and did not have Kaga-san's support.

"I don't believe this! What are you, six?!" His angry voice snapped harshly at the eight genins literally kneeling before him. Kiba and Akamaru looked a little worse for wear but was fine overall. Beside them kneeled Chouji, Reiko, Saporu, Bado, Kageru, Lee, and Kaori; each of whom had played some part in the destruction of Kuunoki property. "Is THIS the actions of a shinobi?! IS THIS THE BEHAVIOUR OF A CHUUNIN-HOPEFUL?! I'm tempted to kick all of you out of the Kuunoki village just for this stunt alone, but that won't appease any of the people you truly hurt!"

"Ano... Naruto-kun." Hinata, standing between Sasuke and Shino at the back of the side of the crowds surrounding the convicted genins tried to reason with Naruto.

"No BUTS." Naruto snapped uncharacteristically, forcing the usually timid Hyuuga to shut up immediately. "They did the deed and now they'll suffer the punishments as well. Each punishment will be catered individually and each one will be undertaken without complaint, or I swear you will know the meaning of real pain by the time I'm finished with you." Naruto threatened, his eyes turning a

brilliant blue with golden rings around it as he activated his Yochigan through his rage.

"Maya." Naruto's slightly calmer but still visibly restrained voice called out in a commanding voice. The quiet Oniyoubu member stepped forward, awaiting her orders. "Render Akamaru in a spirit seal." Maya blinked visibly at Naruto's harsh command.

Spirit seals as their name suggests, relate to seals that are able to seal away the spirit of an anime or person. Without the spirit, the body lie in a comatose state for however long the seal lasts, leaving the body seemingly trapped in an enforced sleep.

"Uh. What's a spirit seal?" Kiba uttered rather anxiously, not willing to part with his beloved dog.

Glaring back at the dog boy with deadly golden hued eyes, Naruto explained in a cold voice. "In essence, Akamaru will be inherently brain dead. Until the time I deem your punishment complete, you will be without your faithful companion by your side. This is your punishment, Kiba! Accept it and suffer."

"No. You can't!" Holding Akamaru close to his chest, Kiba tried to move away from the enraged Naruto. "Akamaru was only following my orders. If you want to punish someone, punish me!" The boy cried out in desperation.

However, these words only made Naruto's eyes narrow further in contempt instead of sympathy. "The way to hurt you the most is to attack your most precious item. The best way to cause a man the most pain is to rid him of his most valued asset, by attacking his heart." His dead voice was so cold, it sent icy chills down most of the genins' backs as they watched for the first time, what Naruto was like when he was completely, utterly angry.

Unlike most people who rage and throw tantrums when angered, Naruto's true anger was as cold as the winter winds. It was a cold fury that burns with cruelty and sly madness aimed at aimed getting

revenge in the most unexpected, most defeating way possible. In this sense, Naruto was becoming more and more like his aunt every day. "Do it, Maya."

Without any protest, Maya pulled out her delicate looking flute. Pulling it towards her lips, she started playing a soft melody on the flute. Even though the music was haunting, its affects were immediate as Akamaru suddenly stiffened before flopping down as if he had suddenly turned into a rag doll. Once the dog was completely immobile on its own, Maya placed her flute away.

"Akamaru? Akamaru! AKAMARU!!!!" Completely ignoring Kiba's cry, Naruto turned his attention to Yami. "Take the boy and dog into the heart of the Oniyoubu forest. He will have to survive the next 2 weeks on his own while taking care of his familiar. That will teach him not to break faith with Kuunoki." Nodding to the Uzumaki heir, Yami did not waste any time as he grabbed hold of the back of Kiba's jacket and started dragging the boy away (who was still crying and holding onto a comatose Akamaru).

It took a few minutes before Kiba and Yami completely disappeared from the clearing that had once been the backyard of the Kazeha household, and now only looked ruined.

With Kiba's punishment organised, Naruto now turned his attention to Waisa Bado, who was the co-contributor to this whole incident having been one of the two original people responsible for the fights. Narrowing his eyes once more until they were only slits, Naruto grind his teeth together as he spoke in a deadly whisper. "I pity you more than I hate you, pathetic little puppet."

Suffice to say, Bado's previous fear vanished at Naruto's taunting words. No one was going to get away with taunting Bado, ever, and he would make sure this upstart of an Uzumaki heir knows it well. Standing up and almost launching himself at the younger boy, Bado did not discriminate when he wants his feelings felt. "Hell! Who the

hell are you calling a Puppet? I'm no one's toy! You're the pathetic one, blondy! You're the one who...!"

Anything else Bado may have said was cut short when a painful fist smashed into his face, instantly bruising his delicate features and almost breaking his jaw at the same time. The culprit was none other than Jubei who glared at the Cloud nin with unrestrained fury literally vibrated out of his Byakugan eyes. "You will learn respect... even if I have to burn it into you." The half breed Hyuuga-Dokudes threatened with intensity.

That is, until Naruto ordered him away. "Step aside, Jubei. I'll deal with him myself." Naruto stated calmly, before lifting a thumb to his lips and biting it firmly in order to draw blood. Staining the blood against his other hand's wrist, Naruto then brought both his hands together to make a short series of seals. When the seals were complete, Naruto was ready. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu: Tenkun no Buki – Kureihiraisho! (Summoning Technique: Weapons of Heavenly Warriors – Red Lightning Rod!) (2)."

This tenkun no buki, like most other tenkun no buki, started off looking small and unassuming. It appears to be a red, leather padded rod, which is attached to a metallic wrist band via some thick chains. The chains weren't very long, only enough to let the rod dangle 20 to 30 centimetres away from Naruto's wrists. Overall, it didn't look dangerous at all and Bado was about to scoff at this so-called weapon of the heavenly warriors when Naruto gave him his final warning. "5 strikes. If you can survive, then your punishment will be over."

The other genins were about to protest themselves considering a measly 5 strikes is nothing compared to what Kiba had to undergo and what most of them would have to undergo as well. However, they were silenced with silencing one look from Jubei, as if telling them to shut up, watch and learn.

"Heh. You think that tiny little stick will scare me? Bring it on!" Bado called out confidently, already manipulating his chakra to heal up his

bruised cheek and jaw.

Naruto stayed calm and firm. "You asked for it." Delicately lifting the chain of the rod before lightly touching the edge of the red leather, Naruto had to fight off the urge to flinch as he felt the stream of intense pain where he momentarily touched the red object. Walking towards Bado, Naruto explained his actions step by step. "First will be your month, it seems you simply talk too much and it brings about more trouble than it's worth."

Bringing the red rod towards Bado, Naruto lightly tapped it against Bado's arrogant chin. The contact only lasted less than a second, but Bado was already on the ground, screaming at the top of his voice for the pain that burned all through out his mouth, jaw, and insides.

Suffice to say, the other genins were completely slack jawed at the display of Bado's agony. That is, until Naruto decided to explain. "The Kurei Hiraisho is a touch-activated weapon that focuses a large amount of chakra directed with pinpoint accuracy at a single kensetsu point in the body, releasing enough power to split your individual cells and shatter the molecules that hold your body together. As such, it's like a mini atomic bomb on a cellular level, leaving its victims in agonising pain that can last up to months at a time, and in some cases, may never recover (3). Not only that, but depending on where I strike you with the Kurei Hiraisho, I may be able to render you dead on contact or paralysed for life."

Fear was evidently bleeding about of Bado's eyes and body as he shook with each attempt to flee from the insane Uzumaki. However, his body wasn't responding to him anymore, and even his exoskeleton and artificial chakra circulatory system seems to be screwed up by that single touch. For the first time in a long, long time, Bado was scared, absolutely terrified.

Unfortunately for Bado, Naruto showed no mercy. He slowly stepped forward towards his prey, ignoring the horrified look directed his way by his intended victim as well as the people around him. He felt nothing when he tapped the Kurei Hiraisho against Bado's bent right

knee – shattering his kneecap in that single instant. Again, the Cloud Nin erupted in agonising screams of pain. But it didn't stop Naruto from tapping his intense weapon against Bado's left elbow, dislocating his elbow joint without any trouble. Walking around the now shivering Cloud Nin, Naruto tapped his weapon against the small of Bado's back, shocking the older boy's nerves system and may very well have rendered the boy quadriplegic for the rest of his life.

"One last one." Naruto muttered softly, as he tapped the Kurei Hiraishi right on top of Bado's right ear. This last tap immediately sent Bado reeling from pain so focused - it literally rebounded around his brain like a ping pong ball. Suffice to say, Bado became completely blind, deaf in one ear and had the most intense headache in his life.

Not giving the Cloud Ninja any reprieve, Naruto quickly and efficiently de-summoned his tenkun no buki, forcefully ignoring the lightning pain that laced up his arm as the weapon disappeared into smoke. What most people were not aware of is that the Kurei Hiraisho is a contact-activated weapon and it does not discriminate between its user and its victim. This means that the Kurei Hiraisho hurts both its summoner as well as its victim simultaneously as long as it's being touched. Through out the whole process of torturing Bado, Naruto had suffered continuous, intense pain upon his hand and arm – the hand that was holding the Kurei Hiraisho in the first place. The fact that Bado had collapsed after one split second of contact just goes to show how high Naruto's tolerance for pain is in comparison. Then again, though Naruto was in pain through out the entire time, it was only affecting his hand, arm and joints, not the rest of his body.

"Take him away." Naruto ordered and Jubei did the honours by transporting Bado's unmoving body and dumping it somewhere else out of eyesight. It'd be a good few weeks before the boy could even move at this rate.

Taking a few minutes to calm himself, Naruto switched his attention to the rest of the culprits, hands still vibrating from the pain of using the Tenkun no Buki. Still kneeling before him, he could tell that he had truly shocked and frightened many of the genins, especially Reiko, Saporu, Lee, Kaori and Chouji. Kageru, however, continued to show no emotion on her blank, snake like face.

Roaming his gaze over the 6 remaining culprits, Naruto golden eyes blazed once more with possibilities, showing that his bloodline limit ability was still active even after all this time. "Saporu, Reiko and Kaori. The three of you only entered the fight at the end. Explain." His words were short and crisp, wanting an explanation and wanting it now.

Saporu shrugged hesitantly before deciding to go first. "They destroyed 5 of my barrels of sake. I've only got 1 left, and it's pretty much half gone. I wanted to vent my anger and punish those responsible." She retorted rather sulkily, still bemoaning the loss of her beloved alcohol.

Kaori took her turn next to speak up. "They crushed all my stolen, I mean, *borrowed* scrolls from home and other places. Now how the hell am I suppose to return them when I'm finished with them. I'm gonna be in a lot of trouble, and it's not fair. So I wanted to get my two cents in with the idiots that ruined my scrolls." Kaori pouted cutely, hoping to garner some sympathy for her cause, but Naruto's expression remained cold and distant, much to Kaori's disappointment.

Lastly, Reiko spoke up regarding her actions. "They ruined my room!" She snapped as if that one statement would answer everything. "My lingerie were scattered everywhere, it's a huge mess! Not to mention my foundations, eye liner, lip stick, flush, stockings, literally EVERYTHING is broken, torn, crushed or ruined. But the most unforgivable thing they did was they ripped apart my collection of beloved Icha Icha Paradise books!" She wailed as tears appeared in her eyes, completely ignorant of all the people around her who had sweat drops upon their foreheads. "I paid good money

for those and now it's all gone.! I had to get back at bastards that were responsible! I just had to make them pay!"

Having heard enough of their petty explanations, Naruto decided their fate. "The tree of you will work together to fix up all the damaged properties, and I mean ALL the damaged properties. Bridges, walls, rooms, everything, even the lawn and trees if need be. You can ask for help, but you have to do all the heavy lifting yourself. And NO CHAKRA or JUTSUs to help you! You will have 5 days to get everything done. Not only that, but Reiko!" Looking upon the grass Nin with a deadly glare on his face. "You are forbidden to wear make up for the duration of your work days until all the property damage has been fixed. Kaori!" Turning his attention the other Grass Nin, Naruto continued. "You will rewrite each of those scrolls that you stole and were subsequently destroyed out onto new scrolls. I want them in triplicate copies. One for me, one for the Kuunoki and one to return to whomever you first stole from. Lastly, Sapor!" Turning away to look at the last of the girls, Naruto snapped up his final instructions. "NO ALCOHOL for the next 2 weeks!" Taking a step back, Naruto gazed amusedly at the shocked faces of all three girls, but he did not have the patience to put up with any of their protests, hence why he waved Hikari, Koushiro and Mishizu to move them away.

With 5 of the original 8 culprits' punishments handed out, that only left Naruto with 3 more – Kageru, Chouji and Lee. "Now, what do you three have to say for yourselves?" Naruto asked in a demanding voice.

Chouji, terrified of what his friend had become, completely fell over himself in apologies. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it to cause so much damage! I didn't mean to! Really! It's just I was mad when Bado called me fat! He called all of us fat and lazy and useless! I was angry! So I entered the fight to make a point. To show him that we weren't like that! But I really didn't mean to go that far! I'm sorry! I'm sooo sorry!" The chubby Akimichi practically sobbed his lungs

outs with his pleas, most of which fell over Naruto's seemingly deaf ears.

Turning away from the sobbing boy, Naruto looked towards Lee who seemed to have a confused and rather put off expression on his face. "And you, what's your excuse?"

If possible, Lee's large caterpillar eyebrows frowned even deeper in annoyance. "I'll admit I only joined the battle because I believed it was a free-for-all spar. I did not realise that it was not a sanctioned fight and that we were causing more damage as we went along. I did not fully understand the situation and yet I willingly participated in the fighting and caused even more damage. I am willing to undertake whatever punishment you deem fit." Lee was very serious with his words and the expression on his face turned very determined.

"However, I don't understand why you are acting so cold and cruel towards your fellow Leaf Nins and other genins. We are all still very young and prone to mistakes and bad decisions. Taking out such harsh punishments on us will only taint our powers of youth and fill us with anger and hatred. I do not condone your actions towards us, the level of your so called punishments are unreasonable in the damage they cause on us physically and mentally. Are you trying to scar us for life?" Lee demanded back at Naruto, which was a surprise for everyone around him, and Lee had always been less than coherent with his speeches in the past.

Even more surprising was the fact that Naruto deemed the questions worthy of answering. "Currently, you are not talking to Uzumaki Naruto, Konoha Chuunin. You are speaking to the Uzumaki heir, currently leader of the Kuunoki Gakure no Sato in the stead of the Lady Oracle. I have responsibility to my citizens and village. You are outsiders here. You and your moronic actions caused damage to our property as well as demoralised a perfectly well planned Chuunin Exam. Not only that, but you brought shame upon your own villages by your idiotic and childish act. You are punished not only because of the property damage but because you are all guests who have destroyed your own welcome here. Believe me, I am being

exceptionally lenient at the moment. If the decision were to fall under the 7 High councillors, you would all be sentenced to death effective immediately (without trial and regardless of your participation in the brawl or not), in order to keep the secrets of the Kuunoki a secret!" Naruto's commanding voice and explanation made Lee feel more humbled than he had ever felt in his life. For the first time in a long time, the bowl hair cut teen truly felt shame and disgusted at his own behaviour. Perhaps he was simply too narrow minded still; unable to grasp the bigger picture and unable to contemplate other people's responsibilities and aims as they relate very little to himself. It was an eye-opening experience for Lee to suddenly realise how small his very existence is compared to everything else. And it only made him even more determined to learn and understand more about the world around him.

Lee didn't lie when he said he would willingly accept any punishment Naruto gave him. After all, he was the proud green beast of Konoha and his word was law, he would not back out of his promise. So, he nodded in acceptance to Naruto's words and accepted his fate as is.

Turning to the last person on the culprit's list, Naruto's eyes narrowed further at Kageru's blank face. "And what do you have to say for yourself, Kageru?"

Kageru's golden snake like eyes shifted to look at Naruto's for a moment before shifting away gracefully. "Nothing. You have no hold over me, do as you wish and be done with it." Her monotone voice uttered the words without remorse, which only further infuriated Naruto.

"So be it." Naruto muttered under his breath against Kageru, his mind already scheming to find a way of torturing the enigmatic Sound Nin until she was close to breaking point. People like her learn through pain as well as other methods. If these specific methods aren't employed, she will never truly learn the consequences of her actions. He may pity her, but he wasn't going to give her an easy way out either. Such is the life of being Orochimaru's experiment.

"I see. Well, first for Chouji, you will be contained in a room in the Forbidden for 1 week with no food except porridge and water. No contact is to be made with anyone. Take him away." Seiko and Katana walked forward and dragged the still sobbing boy away from the scene.

"As for you Lee." Naruto turned his attention now to the green clad boy. "Your limbs will be chained by the special chains used by the Kataichi clan. Each length of chain adjusts to your body's weight and seals up your limb's movement. In affect, you will find it highly difficult to walk or move your hands. Not only that, but you will also be helping the girls rebuild every single thing you've helped destroyed. Get chains on him, Tori. Those chains will stay for however long the reconstruction lasts." The diminutive Gate Guardian walked forward and led the silent Lee away.

"Now, onto the last person." Naruto glared at Kageru with no mercy in his eyes. "You, a creature born of science, incapable of emotions and fear... I will make you feel. I will make you FEAR!" Turning his attentions away from the impassive girl, Naruto's eyes searched out through the crowd before he finally found who he was looking for. Lifting his hand up and pointing it towards his prey, Naruto called out in a loud voice. "You. Yakushi Suzumi, come forward."

Head lowered and shoulders slumped in nervousness, Suzumi (Kabuto's younger sister) slowly shuffled forward, ignoring the heated gazes directed towards her from some of the Dokudes Clan members. Having kept a very low profile all through out the Chuunin Exam, Suzumi was very worried at being singled out, and especially by the Uzumaki heir himself, whom she knew had a grudge against her brother due to past battles. None the less, she did as she was told and before long, she found herself standing in front of the younger Uzumaki.

Waiting until the timid girl finally raised her eyes towards him, Naruto spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. "I will link your spirits together, Yakushi Suzumi and Sasayaki Kageru. In affect, you will each feel what the other feels; you will know how the other thinks. In

essence, you will become part of the other. If one feels fear, the other will to. And nothing will ever break this bond. Think of it as an immortal yet invisible chain which binds you to one another."

Suzumi paled drastically upon hearing Naruto's words, and even Kageru seemed to look surprised and hesitant about Naruto's approach at punishment. Torture and pain were things Kageru had known all her synthetic life, but emotions were completely new to her, and she wasn't sure how to handle them.

Nevertheless, Naruto did not give both girls anytime to object, for in that instant, both Kageru and Suzumi were pushed to the ground and held there by the rest of the gate guardians. Unable to move and with a cloth stuck to her mouth to stop any protests, Suzumi felt incredibly fearful for her life. */ This isn't fair! I didn't do ANYTHING! Is it just because he hates me for who I am? But I didn't do anything against him! I didn't do anything wrong!? No! Stop! STOP!!!* / Her fear ran rampant as she tightened her eyes in fear when she felt the boy trace strange symbols upon her forehead. First a small circle, surrounded by a right-side-up triangle, which again is surrounded by another circle, finished off by the characters for "join" or "joining" written inside the inner-circle (4).

With Suzumi's seal done, Naruto moved towards Kageru and did a similar design upon the artificial human's forehead – a circle within a triangle (this time, up-side-down) inside another circle, followed by the two different character ("Spirit") in the inner-circle. Once the diagrams were complete, Naruto launched into a series of seals before calling out the name of his technique. The technique somehow connected the two seals together to form one complete seal. "Seishin Rentai Fuijin Jutsu! (Spirit Join Sealing System)! (5)"

In an instant, Kageru's mind was bombarded with a huge surge of what she could only guess as emotions. Fear, anxiety, hope, timidity, frustration, destitute, anger, betrayal, hopelessness, confusion, loneliness, Loneliness, LONELINESS! The waves upon waves of emotions bombarded against the weakened wall surrounding her heart, and in one final push, broke through her once thought to be

frozen soul. Unsurprisingly, she screamed with the uncontrolled onslaught against her psyche. Memories that weren't hers battered against her mind, stripping away her understanding of herself. The notion of identity had become vague and distorted. Values and beliefs regarding morality and humanity – notions that she did not understand before – were suddenly in her grasps. It was bewildering, it was incomprehensible, and yet at the same all encompassing. It felt as if for the first time in her life, she felt real, she felt human.

On Suzumi's side of things, the timid girl was feeling anything but an emotional onslaught. A chillingly cold presence had invaded her mind. The only word she could use to describe it was 'empty'. It felt completely 'empty' in every sense of the word. There was no self-worth, no value nor understanding of life. This... this manifestation (for it can only be called an 'existence', not 'life') simply came to be due to the manipulation of man, and when 'I' become useless, 'I' can be discarded and replaced. This was beyond 'loneliness' or 'sadness'; it simply felt 'dead' – the opposite of 'alive'. For the first time in a long time, Suzumi stopped feeling sorry for herself, and started thinking about 'other' people's pain. */ It isn't just me that has suffered. It isn't just me that feels abandoned or helpless in a situation. She's far... far worse... /* Suzumi concluded mentally before making a silent promise to herself that she would do anything in her power to help Kageru get past all this, to help the once emotionless girl become 'human' (6).

It didn't take long before both girls fell into unconsciousness. Naruto then ordered for the two of them to be kept in house-arrest for the rest of their stay in the Kuunoki, until the tournament starts. Turning away from the crowd and walking back towards the White Palace, Naruto silently tied a cloth around his deactivated eyes, knowing that blood would be flowing out of his orbs within seconds of deactivation. Without anyone noticing, Naruto actually held a small grin upon his face. */ The first seeds have been planted, Aunt Ruri. Now, all we have to do is wait for them to mature before we can sow the benefits that is to come. /*

Naruto shuffled into his room tiredly and closed the door behind him before leaning on it with heavy shoulders. Having spent all his energy dealing with the punishment of the various genins for this morning's barrage, he really wasn't in the mood for anything else; however, fate wasn't on his side today it seems. Shuffling forward a few more steps, Naruto literally fell on top of his bed in the sparse, almost empty room. Rolling over onto his back and tightening the white cloth around his bleeding eyes a bit more, Naruto settled into a relaxed pose, waiting for what was to happen next. When silence met his ears, he decided to take the matter into his own hands.

"I know you're there. I may be blind for the moment being, but I'm not stupid." Naruto's tired voice called out into the supposedly empty room. In that instant, two wire strings flew through the air and wrapped around Naruto's neck, pulling him up toward the roof of the room, leaving his body dangling off the bed at a dangerous height. Had Naruto not anticipated the silent attack and prepared himself by jamming his left arm next to his neck in between the wires, he may very well be dead at the moment.

Gasping painfully as the metallic wire bit into his left arm and neck, Naruto gripped the string with his free hand. "Heh. I guess this is your true intention and mission, am I right? Gengakku Mogoto?" He wheezed out slowly.

From the shadowed corners of his room, the invisibility illusion dissolved to reveal none other than the mysterious Sound Nin. Mogoto had one hand up gripping onto the strings that held Naruto's life in the balance, the other hand was lifting slowly towards the tightened strings with the intention of flicking it to vibrate, killing Naruto in the process.

However, before Mogoto could provide the killing blow, both of his/her hands was caught by small golden rings and soon, all his/her limbs were pulled apart in opposite directions, leaving him/her unable to move in mid-air.

Just as Jubei's summoned rings caught and disabled Mogot, Yami summoned forth his Dyamond crystals in order to cut the strings that were wrapped around Naruto's delicate neck. With the strings cut, Naruto fell straight down only to be caught in the arms of Yami and placed behind the Gate Guardian in a protective manner.

All of this happened in a split second and resulted in a complete reversal of fortune. Jubei glared darkly at the Sound Nin. "How dare you invade the sanctity that is the White Palace without permission? How DARE YOU TRY to assassinate a member of the Uzumaki House? And more importantly, the Uzumaki heir!?"

Mogoto didn't speak in return, unperturbed by Jubei's rage. Before the Hyuuga half-breed could lift a single finger in vengeance, all four members in the room were interrupted by a quiet knock on the door.

"Naruto-sama, Jubei-san and Yami-san. The seven high councillors have called for an impromptu meeting, and your presences are required. Please bring the prisoner with you." Touya's timid voice called out from behind the door.

Signing in exhaustion, Naruto couldn't help but feel as if he was hundreds of years old. "How troublesome..."

"sPe A K!" (7)

The words started off gentle and soft, but ended up in a demanding roar. This was the combined voice of the 7 high councillors. They never speak independently; instead, they speak always as a synchronised entity of hundreds upon thousands of souls. That is the secret of the 7 high councillors; it is an entity made up of un-dead souls that accumulate and fill the vacuum with a single voice, but no identity; with direction, but no specific control. It is also what makes them intimidating and dangerous, for souls of the dead have no mercy for those that living.

"At 0900 this morning, I was called upon to take judgement over the punishments of 8 outside genins for the destruction of Kuunoki property and the disruption of peace in our lands. All 8 exam participants have been placed to their individual punishments." Naruto's voice was crisp and strong, belaying the fact that he was swaying lightly on his feet. The drama this morning, the overuse of his eyes as well as the assassination attempt on his life just minutes prior was all suddenly catching up to him, leaving him feeling more exhausted than ever.

"After seeing the genins off to their various sentences, I returned to my room to rest, only to be met by Gengakku Mogoto – one of the Sound Genins who came to participate in the Chuunin exam. Mogoto attempted to take my life by way of strangulation, only to fail as Jubei and Yami interrupted the attack. Directly after the rescue, we were called to attend this meeting." Pausing for affect, Naruto then continued with the rest of his speech. "I have brought with me the guilty party." At this point, Jubei dragged the unmoving and silent Mogoto forward to be viewed by the forms of the seven high councillors.

After a long minute of silence, the voices of the dead echoed in the room with a single thought. "P e N a L tY... i S ... d E a Th ..."

"As is the will of the Seven High Councillors." Naruto, Jubei and Yami bowed deeply, never noticing the slight rising of tension upon Mogoto's body.

"Are you sure this is okay, Naruto-sama?" Hikari asked from beside Naruto, as it was her turn standing guard today. Looking out the window, her gaze turned cold but still held a glint of pity as she watched the preparations for the Sound Ninja's very public burning.

"The Councillors won't be satisfied until someone dies today. And I'd rather that 'someone' be Mogoto than any of the other genins." Naruto answered calmly, his eyes still covered by the cloth even as he held tightly onto the window sill. He may be a Ninja and expects

death to be part of his shadows, but that does not mean he liked killing all that much. It's just part of the job, and if he could kill a few while saving many, then so be it. He would bear that burden and guilty on his shoulders. */ All for the greater good, I suppose. /* Naruto thought sarcastically to himself.

"But why Mogoto? And not say... Kageru. Truthfully, the two of them creep me out the most." Tori's innocent voice questioned from Naruto's other side.

"Both Mogoto and Kageru were created artificially, experiments born of human manipulation. But while Kageru is an artificial human, Mogoto is simply a puppet with a human skin." Naruto muttered under his breath.

"Huh? Sorry, I don't get it." Tori tilted his head to one side in confusion.

"I'm not sure I understand either, Naruto-sama." Hikari's usually calm voice held a hint of curiosity as well.

Naruto sighed before he continued on with the rest of his explanations. "Kageru may have been created through experimentation but she was a born human none the less. Mogoto started out as a human baby but was stripped of his natural skeleton and internal organs, only to be replaced by puppet parts. Mogoto was originally one of Akasuna no Sasori's (Sasori of the Red Sands) experiments. They were trying to make a puppet that had human skin and could grow as the human body grows – basically a living puppet. However, when Orochimaru left the organisation of Akatsuki, he took the yet-unfinished Mogoto with him, and since then, he had completed the human puppet as you can see before you. Mogoto is nothing but a mindless puppet, a complete slave to his masters. Hell, his reproductive organs were stripped away from him a long time ago, leaving him as neither male nor female; after all what would a puppet need sex for." Naruto snorted in disgust as his hands fisted tightly in revulsion at the idea.

"But... doesn't he still have a soul and a mind?" Tori asked once again, his young eyes filled with sadness and pity towards the Sound Slave. "Doesn't he deserve to be saved?" Those last words were murmured in a whisper.

"I don't know. What I do know is that he... she... it will never be able to break out of Orochimaru's control. Killing it... *him* ... would be the most merciful thing we can do. By destroying his body, we effectively release his soul to be reincarnated. And with that, at least he will find some peace." Naruto concluded as he turned away from the window.

Below in the streets, a large bonfire was lit among the logs that were stationed beneath the Sound Nin's feet. Having been strapped and tied onto a large wooden log that was stationed perpendicularly in the middle of the ground, Mogoto could not find any purchase to escape his captivity, nor could he find the will to do so. He had failed his master after all, and failures do not deserve to exist. With that in mind, as well as no voice box to express his non-existent emotions, Mogoto stayed silent all through out the process of being burnt alive. It didn't take long for the logs to catch fire, and it took even less time for the fire to consume all the wood as well as Mogoto's body.

The crowd that surrounded the spectacle, mainly consisting of the exam participant genins as well as a few stray Kuunoki members watched the entire event in a melancholic mood. Most of the Kuunoki members were used to such public executions and public burnings; they were numb to the harsh realities of life in the Hidden Air village. The genins however, watched in silent horror and fascination. Having learnt of Mogoto's crime, none of them were willing to stand on the Sound Nin's side. And not to mention, they were still shaken by the morning's events, none were willing to test the Uzumaki heir's wrath anytime soon.

And so ends the first and possibly only life among the 30 genins that had made their way to the Hidden Air Village on account to participate in the special Chuunin Exam.

End.

(1) For those of you who haven't seen the pictures of these seals yet, please go to my website to have a look at the pictures. Links are on my profiles' page.

(2) Finally, I revealed my 4th Tenkun no Buki – for more information as to its affects or what it looks like, go to my website. Links are on my profile's page.

(3) I've made it so that the Kurei Hiraisho is the most 'painful' of the Tenkun no bukis.

(4) A picture of this seal is on my website, links on my profile's page.

(5) "Seishin" or ("Jing Shen" in Chinese) means 'spirit'; and "Rentai" (or "Lian Dai" in Chinese) means 'Join' or 'link together'. So "Seishin Rentai" (or "Jing shen lian dai" in Chinese) should mean the joining of spirits.

(6) You may be wondering why I emphasized so much on this situation. The truth of the matter is that the 'relationship' between Suzumi and Kageru will be an important aspect in the third arc. So here, that's the last spoiler I'll give you until I actually start writing the damn third arc. Enjoy!

(7) I'm trying to depict sound effects using just written words. Please bear with me. The words should come out like a fluctuating singing voice by a multitude of people (both sexes and all ages) as if a chorus of hundreds are singing the same words but on different notes all at the same time.

Ehehe. Sorry for the wait, I was a bit depressed at one point when my supervisor went on leave and I was left with no boss, but yeah, I've gotten over that now.

I'm not very happy with this chapter but it's okay. It detailed all the things that I needed to be there, even though the way I presented it

may not be the best. Oh well, I've been lacking a bit of inspiration lately anyway.

So, I hope you all enjoy this chapter. I'm hoping that I will be finishing up RoF in the next 2 chapters (keep your fingers crossed)! Once again, please give me a review - tell me what you like about it as well as how you think I can improve for the future. Thanks for reading!

Ending of this chapter in my life NEW

Restoration of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity; Naruto OOC; PG-13. After Sandaime's death, Naruto made a promise to himself to defy his own destiny and pursue a future that will lead to freedom and happiness. Chapter Thirty-five: Ending of a chapter in life

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** */ Thoughts /*, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: OOCness. The first half of the chapter is all recap and conversations. The second half is pretty much all action and jump scenes. There is a dark bit in the middle, and the ending kind of cuts off, but that is the affect I was after in the first place. Hope you enjoy this last chapter of Restoration of Faith.

Merry Christmas everyone and have a happy new year. I'll have Trials of Faith uploaded sometime after Christmas/around new year. And then I'll take another break from writing as I've got my holidays planned in mid January. See you!

Other notes:

Alright! We finally get a glimpse of Uzumaki Kushina of the whirlpool country, for those of you who follow the manga series. I was surprised that she does look a little similar to my depiction of Yuuki. Other than the fact that they have slightly different facial features (simply because my personal drawing

style is different to Masashi Kishimoto's), and the fact that Yuuki have bangs while Kushina doesn't, and of course the hair and eye colour; they do look similar in a vague way. I always knew Naruto's mom would have very long hair. Anyway, on with the story.

Chapter 35

A month has passed in relative peace in the Kuunoki village. After the brutal display of Naruto's wrath and how far the Councillors were willing to go to enforce their seemingly endless rules, it was force-fed into the genin's mind that they should not push their luck any further. Hence why the last few weeks were as quiet as a breeze. Most of the genins were busy with training themselves in the Hidden Air village, while they still had an opportunity to do so. Some of the genins however, antisocial as they were, simply locked themselves away in their rooms, refusing to interact with anyone else.

Slowly, time passed and life moves on.

Naruto leaned heavily against the back of the couch. Tiredly rubbing at his eyes, his mouth opened in order to issue another command, as he has been prone to do for the last month. "Give me a status update on all the participating genins."

From behind him stood a row of Gate Guardians, all ten were in attendance. Jubei was the first to step forward and detailed out all that had occurred regarding those few genins whom had underwent Naruto's prescribed punishments almost a month ago.

"The Inuzuka boy's individual stamina, experience and overall skill have increased drastically. He no longer requires the soldier pill in order to sustain him for several days of no sleep and he has also learnt constant vigilance during his time trapped in the Oniyoubu forest. All his senses have been heightened to the point of being better than his companions, due to the... shall we say, unnatural

surrounding he was forced to survive and adapt to. His pet, Akamaru has been released from Maya's seal about 2 weeks ago, as per your orders, and the two of them have been seen training extensively in and around the surrounding forests. If I am to give an evaluation - skill wise, the boy is already mid-Chuunin material by the standards of the outside world. What he needs is a little discipline and experience in working as a proper ninja. Give him a few more months back in his village, and he'll fly through the next Chuunin exam without any problems." Jubei concluded before he started on his next description.

"Waisa Bado... has been undergoing some psychological changes, as you've probably expected. The attack you did on his brain using the Kurei Hiraisho (Red Lightning Rod)... broke something in his mind. The memory seals that were implanted into his head were completely destroyed. The boy suffered bouts of nausea and memory crashes regularly for the first two weeks but these bouts have since declined substantially. I wouldn't say he's made a complete 180 degree change in character or personality, but the boy has certainly quieted down a lot, to the point where he has become rather antisocial and keeps to himself most of the time, even avoiding his own teammates – Sakeyama Saporu. I conclude that he is still having some problems reconciling the fake memories to the real ones. After all, having lived so many years under a false pretence, it would be hard for him to come out of it in an instant (1). Overall, I'd say it was an improvement. But he'll still need a few more months in order to recover from the shock. Again, skill wise, he is already high Chuunin material. Bado's weakness has always been his pride and personality; with a bit of humility and sanity back in place, he'll do fine. How far he goes is really up to him." Jubei paused in order take a breath.

"Bado of the Waisa clan will become an important chess piece in the near future (2). I'll need you to keep an eye on him, Jubei. Do not let him escape our grasp of control." Naruto commanded the Dokudes half-breed, and Jubei could only nod in acceptance.

Jubei's shoulders slumped in resignation as he thought about the next three subjects; he just couldn't help but sigh in exasperation. "Sakeyama Sapro, Kawasaki Reiko and Asagiri Kaouri... all three girls didn't really change much, other than gained a bit more physical strength, learnt a bit about coordination and of course became a bit more disciplined. Their punishments were pretty straight forward and each completed their assigned tasks satisfactory and within the time limit. Each has become slightly less flamboyant about their hobbies but overall, they are still as they've always been. All three currently have low to mid-Chuunin level skills, but if they push themselves a little harder, it won't be long before they become jounin. However, I can't see that happening while they're here. They will need more outside influences in order to push them pass their current limits." Naruto nodded in understanding. He needed the three girls' skills to increase, but that isn't until a few years later. He had time to wait. Everything was going according to Ruri's plan and he had to make sure that the rest of the world (be they Akatsuki or the Council 7) not get wind of any of this until it's simply too late (3).

"Surprisingly, the Akimichi boy adapted fairly well during his time of imprisonment in the Forbidden Tower. Strangely, although he was unable to leave the tower, that did not mean he wasn't allowed visitors. All four members of the ex-sound four visited him at least once a day during the 2 week imprisonment period. I don't know what they did or talked about during those visits exactly, but whatever it was really made a change in Chouji-kun. He's become even more dedicated a ninja than he was before. Although his confidence hasn't changed, he has become a lot wiser in regard to his own weaknesses and strengths. He's even devised new and innovative ways to train himself or work on his weaknesses after he was released from the tower. Overall, the boy still has much to work on, but he's making steady progress and at the rate he's going now, it won't be long for him to fly through Chuunin and possibly the jounin exam, depending on his will to succeed, that is." Jubei concluded the results of the humble Akimichi and moved on to the Gai-replica.

"Rock Lee, this boy is definitely amazing. It took him only two days to adapt to the chains. And by the end of the punishment, he opted to keep them on as further incentive for training." Jubei shook his head slightly, still finding Lee's unorthodox methods rather unbelievable. "Having seen his quick adaptation to the chains, both Tori and Touya have spent some time in training Lee on other styles of Taijutsu and how he could use those chains as a weapon, instead of just a restraint. The boy's hardworking attitude has also won over a few of the Kuunoki citizen's respect. When they discovered that Lee was unable to perform any Ninjutsu or Genjutsu due to his body's abnormality, some of them offered to help Lee learn a few easy sealing techniques. Not enough to make the boy an expert, but certainly enough for him to store elemental attacks into scrolls and use it when he really needs to. Overall, even I was highly impressed by his work ethic. That boy will go far, with or without his handicap, no doubt about it." Jubei answered firmly, fully confident in his words; and Naruto couldn't help but smile. The Uzumaki heir was truly proud of his green clad friend. Lee deserved every word of praise that came his way and more.

"Lastly, regarding Sasayaki Kageru and Yakushi Suzumi, both girls pretty much locked themselves into separate rooms for the first week before the trauma on their minds finally forced them to face each other and try to reach a resolution. It took a while but eventually they 'talked'. And with the conversation, I believe things were shared that had never been shared before. I wouldn't say that they have formed a cohesive bond, but if not, it is becoming very close." Giving Naruto a sad but hopeful smile, Jubei took this opportunity to voice his own opinions. "I never thought there would be such a way in order to solve two deep problems. You gave Kageru her humanity back and gave Suzumi a reason to live and not hide. I am truly amazed by your understanding of human nature and how you're dedicated to healing it, no matter what the circumstances." He voiced softly and admirably.

Naruto shifted a little in the uncomfortable silence that followed. He was humbled by Jubei's words but truly, he didn't feel as if he's done

anything worthy of praise. He saw a problem that needed to be fixed, and tried to fix it. Both Kageru and Suzumi would become valuable allies in the future if only he could secure their loyalty or have them owe him a favour. But beneath all the manipulations and benefits, Naruto just wanted to help. He had known what it was like to live without a purpose, he had known what it was like to feel empty (4). In such times of loss and emptiness, what you really needed was for someone to come along and tell you they care.

"The last member that was punished. Well, Mogoto Gengakku was dealt the death penalty by public burning. The ashes that was recovered has been sent back to Otogakure. No word has arrived back from the leader of the Sound in regards to his genin's behaviours and resulting punishment. While the other villages (Leaf, Cloud and Grass) have made some sort of apology for their genin's behaviours. Overall, as far as I'm aware, these cases are closed."

"Mn. And the rest?" Naruto asked the other guardians, having straightened his back off the couch, ready for more news.

This time it was Hikari who spoke up regarding a few of the genin's progress that she was privy to. "Uchiha Sasuke has made great strides in learning the Elemental arts. He's still a beginner, but he shows talent and dedication. Although hot headed and very impatient to learn, his frustrations are curbed by Katano-sama's patience and humility. The two makes quite a pair. (5) Although there is still a long way to go, he is learning, and making progress. My guess is that he'll reach mastery level in 5 or 6 years at the rate he's going. But that's just a guess." Hikari concluded, just as her brother started up with more explanation regarding some of the other genins.

"Yamanaka Ino too has made great strides in her progress. Did you know that she is affiliated to the element of lightning(6)? I would have thought she was wind type or water type, but anyway. The point is that she's been getting some tips in regard to lightning manipulation from myself, learning extra sword techniques from both Katana and Kenshin-san, as well as working with a few of the Dokudes clan members in regard to medical techniques. This girl

can do almost anything once she puts her mind to it. She has the potential to be a well-rounded warrior." Everyone could hear the pride in Koushiro's voice as he spoke about his part-time casual student. It really was a surprise how well Ino had adapted into learning a variety of skills all at the same time.

"As for the others, Tenten has been working with myself and father for the last few weeks, mostly on her speed and strength. Her accuracy is already 100 percent, no need to work on that aspect of her skill. I still believe she relies way too much on throwing a barrage of weapons at her opponent though. But she insists on continuing to do so, since her role on the team is as a long range support fighter. Anyway, to make my summary short, she's progressing at a normal speed. Not too fast, not too slow, no major successes, but then again, no disappointments either. She'll make a fine Chuunin, but I don't expect she'll go much further than that." Katana spoke up suddenly to give his own report.

Curious, Naruto asked for more details. "Why would you say so, Katana-kun?"

Katana shrugged. "The girl has little aim in life other than being the best she can be. Yes, she says she wants to become a legendary ninja like Tsunade, but she hasn't gone through the hardships and the pain that entangles shinobis that were born with strength. Basically, my point is that with power, comes pain and sacrifice. Tenten is a very ordinary girl, with very ordinary skills. She is exceptional in what she currently can do because she works damn hard everyday to achieve it. However, following her current course, she will never be able to reach beyond her maximum potential, unlike those who still have much room to grow, she is already well on her way to reaching top form already."

"So, you're saying that she will reach her maximum strength very early on, but will be unable to move beyond that, right?" Naruto clarified Katana's words, and the younger boy nodded in agreement. "Hmm... I'll just have to find a way to boost her up, then..."

Bringing the topic back into focus, Jubei once more detailed out what's been happening with his dear half sister and cousin. "Hinata has mainly focussed on furthering her medical techniques as well as improving her own brand of Jyuuken. She's coming along well. Neji, on the other hand is difficult to judge. He's already a master in the Jyuuken art, and so he should be as the heir to the Hyuuga Clan. But I don't know... it still looks too ridged to me." The older teen admitted as he shrugged in a casual way. "I've been trying to get him to think outside the box, but he's very rigid in personality, like a rock almost. Which is why it isn't surprising to find out even though he uses Jyuuken, he's an Earth elemental user, unlike Hinata's fluid water elemental style."

"However. He has been concentrating much of his time on shape manipulation. Making chakra strings, chakra swords and other such weapons. I think he's trying to develop some sort of invisible, long range attack, much like the Hakke Kushou, but with slightly different results. Unfortunately, being the secretive son of a bxxxxh that he is, he hasn't allowed me much access in seeing him train, and I can't be bothered spying on him, when I've got my own sister to teach at the same time. So yeah, he is developing; how far has he gone, I'm not sure. But if I had to guess, I'd say he's currently at high Chuunin level, or maybe low Jounin. Hinata's a little less powerful, not because she lack talent, but because she lacks experience. So I'm giving her mid to high Chuunin level."

Naruto nodded nonchalantly, as if expecting such an answer in the first place. "Whose next?" He asked for directions on the rest of the Chuunin exam participants.

Surprisingly, this time it was Dokudes Seiko who stepped forward with further information. "The puppet user, Kankuro has been keeping to himself through out the last month. He has been seen sparing with the ice user, Naja Daiku on occasion, but overall, he keeps a low profile. We all know that his weakness lies mainly in his dependence of his puppets, but he doesn't seem concerned about finding other avenues to improve himself, and that will eventually be

his downfall. However, he is very good at what he does. Not exactly a genius or even a specialist yet, but he does have talent. And if he works at it, he will continue to be a damn good puppet master, but not much else. Currently, he's at high Chuunin rank."

"Going back to Naja Daiku." Seiko continued her spiel without stop. "He's been getting help from some of the minor members of the Dokudes clan on improving his shape manipulation. I don't know exactly what he's been working on, but that guy's already at high-Chuunin level. Any more improvements on his personal skills will boost him up to Jounin level, so I'm not worried."

"Jikizuka Tsubame-san and Iwama Uzura-kun from Stone has been spending most of their time in the Library, which is now reopened for public viewing. Of course, the Librarians were rather suspicious of them at first, especially considering Tsubame's role in blasting a hole through the Library's very walls, but none the less, the two has been working diligently through some of the public technique scrolls there. Nothing too high ranked or dangerous, mostly special training exercises that can be used to boost their chakra control and give them ideas. Watching as they build on their teamwork during their internal spars, I can conclude that both are ready for Chuunin rank in skill, but need more experience as they progress." Hikari gave a very straight forward description on the two members from the Iwa team that weren't invited to become apprentices.

"The last two members that we can report on are Harate Eiji, and Kapasu Juro." Mishizu spoke up in a monotone voice, still in her militaristic stance. "Harate Eiji has been seeking extra training from several minor members of the Dokudes clan. I know that he has since been trained in the arts of poison, advanced human biology and neurology, acupuncture, and other medical fields. Offensively, he studied in the Kuunoki Library sometimes and managed to learn a few medical affiliated attacks. It was also discovered that he had lightning chakra affiliation, which resulted in further self-study. Overall, his diligence in his own personal studies will bring him far. He's an overall average fighter with above average skills in all

sections of Shinobi life – be it medicine, Genjutsu, Ninjutsu, Taijutsu or weapon skills. He's already at mid-Chuunin level rank, and if he works hard enough, he'll be able to progress much further at a steady pace. What I am worried about however is his state of mind. You may already be aware, Naruto-sama, but Harate Eiji suffers from psychotic episodes now and again due to his anger problem. As such, I've also suggested to him that he should take up psychology in order to help him control himself. The rest is up to him."

Pausing a little to gather her thoughts, Mishizu uncharacteristically hesitated before following through with the rest of her narrative. "As for Kapasu Juro. He didn't initiate further training on his own. In fact, the most I've seen him do is follow Harate Eiji around in the Library, picking up random books or scrolls and looking through them. I have yet to see him unseal the sword on his back."

An uncomfortable silence fell upon Naruto and all the Gate Guardians in the room. That is, before Naruto gave a heavy sigh and his shoulders dropped in disappointment. "Not surprising, with his personality and all. He really doesn't want to be a Ninja. I'm surprised he survived until now, let alone made it all the way here."

"What do you wish for us to do, Naruto-sama?" Katana piped up, eager for a little combat to discipline the useless runt from the Hidden Mist, if only Naruto would give him the order.

"We do nothing." Naruto's reply dissolved Katana's enthusiasm for an upcoming fight/slaughter.

"But why? You've asked us to make sure to push all the other participants to go beyond their limits, why should we let this little runt go?" Katana couldn't help but whined slightly.

"Because I know that no matter how much we push, Kapasu Juro will not react favourably. I have seen many future scenarios in which we try to manipulate him into a proper soldier and Shinobi, all of which would result in him despising our interference and or leading to his own death." Naruto's comment drowned out the rest of

Katana's arguments. "But do not worry, when the time comes, Juro will realise that he cannot escape his destiny, even if the cost of such a realisation may be too high for him to pay."

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Naruto's mind refocussed on how many people on the list of original Chuunin exam participants were left since the start of the conversations. "So that just leaves those whom have been accepted as apprentices, minus Sasuke, and plus Gaara that is. Are there any news on them?"

"Sabaku no Temari is like me. She's got wind affinity, and although her chakra control is no where near our levels, she is consistently good at communicating with the wind. As such, with time she will develop into a powerful wind mistress." Akiko piped up with enthusiasm, proudly proclaiming her apprentice's strengths.

"Communicating with the wind? What do you mean?" Naruto asked, having never heard of such a phrase before, even though he himself is a wind-elementally affiliated person.

Akiko's eyebrows rose in surprise at Naruto not knowing this secret of wind manipulation. "Naruto-sama, you are aware that in this world there are 6 different chakra types (7), right? And of those 6, 5 are currently used with common jutsus – Fire, Lightning, Wind, Water and Earth. These five elements are the foundation of all jutsu, and the reason why the five nations are named as they are. Most people's chakra naturally leans towards a certain element. And these elemental affinities each have their own properties. For example, you know that the wind's nature is the cut, right? Wind cuts everything within its path, or rips it apart depending on the force of the wind. What you don't understand is that wind is also 'forever in motion'. Air cannot stand still, it's impossible. Even if you contain air within something, the air inside of said container will still be moving, even a little. It is this 'motion' that makes air or wind chakra nature so dangerous."

Pausing to give Naruto time to decipher the meaning of her words, Akiko then continued on with her explanation in detail. "Most people

with wind affinity often use it for close-quarter combat, like that Sarutobi-Asuma jounin. He literally splits his wind natured chakra into two fields and grinds them together to create an incredibly sharp edge. Unfortunately, that's as far as most people take wind-natured chakra manipulation. They think that if they can sharpen their weapons enough, then they are as strong as they're gonna get. That's an incorrect assumption. As I said before, the true power of wind natured chakra is its ability to stay in motion, why not use that to our advantage. Take Temari's Kamaitachi attack for example, she creates wind blades with her chakra, and basically focusses them in a certain direction, creating an effective offensive and defensive technique at the same time."

Seeing Naruto nod in understanding of her detailed description, Akiko kept up with the rest of her narrative. "If it's me, I have the ability to call upon the winds to do all my bidding. I can create gales of hurricane force or form a small breeze barely strong enough to lift a leaf. All it takes is to generate a string of wind-natured chakra outside your body, using it to attract air particles as it flows through space, and use the condensed air particles as my main weapon. It's quite simple in theory. And when I say 'communicating with the wind,' what I actually mean is releasing your wind-natured chakra out of your body and into the air, capturing and actively manipulating the air around you. After all, air is infinite in its availability and it is forever in motion. It takes a lot of skill and practice to be able to manipulate the air around you. However, it is also due to its 'abundance' and 'infinite motion' that makes air one of the most difficult elements to control."

"How so? I would have thought fire or lightning would be difficult to control due to their chaotic nature, wouldn't wind be a breeze compared to them?" Naruto asked in curiosity.

"Not really. It is true that fire and lightning are a lot more... how to say... combustive? Reactive? Than any of the other chakra natures, but that's not to say they are harder to control, it all depends on the mechanism of the chakra nature." This time, it was Koushiro who spoke up. Being the resident Lightning affiliate, Koushiro took it up

on himself to progress the conversation along, especially when it concerns his own chakra nature. "As Akiko said, each chakra nature has its own properties. For wind, its nature is to cut, stay in motion, and is often in abundance. However, it is also very much disbursed from one another. To use any wind attack, you really have to focus and condense the air particles enough to form something solid, or else it's pretty much useless."

"Fire affinities have a nature to burn, or combust, it reacts to air and is ultimately all consuming. As long as there is something to burn, fire will continue to exist. It is aggressive in the sense that it does not care about anything else, its only desire is to continue to burn until nothing but ash is left. You may think this is part of its chaotic nature, and you'd be right. But at the same time, that just makes fire all the more easy to start. All you need is a spark and Viola!" Koushiro snapped his finger. "Fire comes to life. Once it is sparked, it's pretty much self-sustaining until it completely consumes everything it is able to burn, then it dies out. This means that for Fire natured people, all they really need is the initial effort to spark a fire, and the rest is up to the fire technique. The Gokakyu no Jutsu (Grand Fireball technique) is a good example of this. Of course, that is not to say that fire techniques cannot be controlled once it is created. Shinobi uses all sorts of tricks in order to control fire type attacks, be it strings like the Ryuuka no Jutsu, or simply summoning a form made out of fire, like the Karyuudan. You should know more about fire elementals as Konoha is full of fire affiliated people."

"In the ancient texts of the bending arts, 'lightning' is said to be a 'pure expression of fire bending – with out aggression. (8)' Nowadays, lightning affinities is seen as an element all on its own, due to the abundance of people now able to manipulate it. It's a relatively new art, but a powerful one none the less." Hikari interrupted her brother's rant in order to refocus on the differences between the elemental affinities and their nature. "Lightning has the nature to shock, or electrocute. Similar to fire, its usage often requires an initial spark in order to create the lightning in the first place, and then all it needs is to be directed towards a certain target,

the lightning will do the rest. With lightning, it needs just 2 things, the 'release', and the 'guidance' (9). 'Release' means the moment the lightning is sparked or the moment it is let go to do its nature, and the 'guidance' is basically the direction in which it is focussed towards. Lightning is deadly and precise but it isn't aggressive or all consuming. I hope that makes sense, Naruto-sama." Hikari concluded the discussion with bow.

"I see. Thank you all for the explanations, I had not been aware that there were such subtleties regarding each elemental affinities." Naruto thanked the older teens for their input. Shaking his mind to clear it from wandering further away from the original topic of discussion, Naruto refocussed his thoughts. "Now, can we get back to the rest of the apprentices and what they were up to individually?"

Yami stepped forward this time to give his own report on his new apprentice. "Shino-kun is reserved, calm, calculating and quite resourceful. However, he relies heavily on his hive of Kikaichu insects. I have been trying to expose him to other ways of fighting. He has been receptive to some, and others... he's been less than receptive to." Pausing slightly, Yami shook his head as if to ward away some bad memories. "In the time that we have trained together, I have opened his mind to other possibilities. Shino-kun can now use his Kikaichu as an extension to his body, allowing him to form claws like a praying mantis, or grow wings like bees (10). In addition to training him in these uses for the Kikaichu, I've also introduced him to poisons, simple summoning rituals and or seals, as well as how to mix interspecies of insects to create a new, mutant species. Overall, he has the capability to grow beyond the realm of our current imagination, the rest is up to him."

"Thank you, Yami. Have you got anything else to report?" Naruto answered, glad that Shino's training has been going smoothly.

"Yes, there is one other subject matter I'd like to discuss with you, Naruto-sama. Midou Kei who is currently undergoing training with my father, Oniyoubu Jin, has showed steady progress in both fields of Genjutsu and Seals. As you know, he has already been

experimenting with summoning seals used in conjunction with elemental attacks. However, my father has been showing him how summoned animals worked in similar ways. The boy is prudent in his studies. Unfortunately, he lacks imagination, and the ability to think outside the box. This is not necessarily a bad thing; it just means he's more of a conventional fighter and tactician. He is unable to come up with strategies on the spot and change those strategies when things do not go according to plan. In the future, it may become a deciding factor on how far he can go with his abilities." Yami concluded with a solemn face.

"It would be a shame if he could not go beyond his current limit, but only time can tell. Thank you for your input, Yami-san." Naruto gestured for the next person to go ahead.

Tori jumped in without hesitation. "Rensa Ahiru-chan, currently studying as an apprentice under my dad is doing very well! She's got spunk, determination and the drive to succeed. She's a little stubborn though, but all of us get that way at times. Overall, all the Kataichi clan are quite happy with her efforts, work ethic and development so far. She's already got chakra nature-manipulation down pretty good, and a host of Earth based jutsus under her belt. What we've been concentrating on teaching her is Earth bending, without any hand seals, sort of like how Katono-sama is teaching the Uchiha. She's got a natural gift for earth bending that's for sure. However, we're still having trouble helping her focus on the vibrations of the earth."

Already noting Naruto's confused face, Tori didn't give the Uzumaki heir a chance to voice his questions before he launched into his well-prepared speech about what the hell he was talking about. "Similar to what we were taking about before regarding Wind, Fire and Lightning chakra-nature manipulation. Earth chakra manipulation also has its own 'layer's of control. Earth is a proud and stubborn element; it represents strength, stability, hard headedness and an unwillingness to change. However, these are just the top of the ice burg; there are many layers of earth after all. With every step and

every movement, vibrations travel the earth, and we of the Kataichi clan are experts at reading the earth, including what each of these tiny vibrations mean. Teaching that idea to Ahiru-chan was hard."

"Not only that, but as stable as the earth looks, everyone knows the power and level of destruction that can be caused by earth quakes, which is when the earth becomes angry at something or another. Even the earth has limits, and we're also trying to teach Ahiru-chan what those limits are, before earth finally crumbles into sand." Tori answered in a serious voice, surprising Naruto slightly, but also piping his curiosity.

"Tell me, Tori. What is the difference between Earth manipulation and Sand manipulation? Considering we've got Gaara fighting against Ahiru in the first match of the tournament, who do you think would win?" Naruto asked in pure curiosity.

Folding his arms together and pouting cutely, Tori thought seriously over the situation before finally answering with a "I don't know who would win." Giving a short sigh, Tori decided to explain his decision. "Sand and Earth may seem similar but they are actually very different. Sand is the particles that make up the earth, and the earth is the condensed, mixed form of sand. When earth breaks, sand is the result. But sand can never truly turn back into earth, unless you're talking about compacting it for several hundred years until it forms a layer in the earth's surface, then maybe. But yeah, I don't know, sorry." Rubbing the back of his head in rueful embarrassment, Tori was surprised that Naruto waved away his concern nonchalantly.

"Don't worry about it, Tori. I was just curious." Eyes sharpening once more in attentiveness, Naruto turned to look at Jubei directly. "Since we're on the topic of Gaara, what's happening to him anyway?"

"Gaara-san has spent most of the last month either practicing to control his sand once more, or training with Kaga-san. Unfortunately, I am not privy to their training regimes, so I have no idea how far he's gone in relation to his skill and capabilities."

"I see. Let's move on then." Changing the subject quickly, Naruto tried to not think about how Gaara's coping now with only half his original chakra base (11).

"Under my tutelage, Hikon-kun has improved further in her skills of Genjutsu. I can confidently say that if she ever battled any Genjutsu master, with the exception of Uchiha Itach and his use of the Mangakyo Sharingan, I can guarantee that Hikon-kun will probably win the skirmish." Hikari confirmed with full confidence in her student. "However, other than Genjutsu, she has shown only minor improvements in the other fields. She is still a speed freak in every sense of the word, but she lacks power, hence why I've been teaching her about human anatomy (not just about neurology) and how to strike precisely at danger points on the human body. For mid-range to long distant attacks, I've forced Hikon-kun to learn how to use senbon needles, which will come in very handy for her physical stature and strengths. At the same time, I am also training her in strategy and tactics, how to use the environment to her advantage, simple things like that which most Shinobis ignore." Hikari finished with a calm tone of voice and Naruto moved his attention to the next spokesperson, who just so happen to be Dokudes Seiko.

"The snow nin Yuse Samure has learnt much from my father, Dokudes Hana, mostly pertaining to seals of course." Seiko started with a rather bland voice, as if not really interested in seals much herself, but was forced to give a report on it. "Anyway, although Samure is a Ninjutsu library in human form, he's quite inventive and has managed to create a few personal jutsus on his own. It's an incredible feat considering his age, and he only has room to grow. Overall, there's really no point in worrying about his progress. He's definitely going to become a damn powerful Shinobi, with or without our intervention." Seiko concluded without any fanfare and they moved on to the next topic.

"Spending the last month training under my father, Raitei Hideki, Sakeyama Asahi has been able to integrate some lightning attacks to his more common fire techniques. As you probably already know,

Naruto-sama, the Sakeyama clan originated from Fire Country but settled down in Hidden Cloud. They are the only clan in the Hidden Cloud that uses fire techniques, hence my father decided to enhance those specific abilities. His overall chakra control and Taijutsu style with the staff is going well, but they didn't touch on his Ukyo's summons. That's a technique belonging solely to Asahi. He's already at mid to high Chuunin level, and once he signs the family contract for cats, Asahi will become a force to be reckoned with." Koushiro went straight to the point and finished up his narrative without further embellishment.

"Last but not least, we have the sole apprentice from the Mist team – Harate Echiko. Having progressed under my mother's training, Echiko's overall chakra control and water techniques have improved dramatically." Mishizu continued her account of all the Mist Shinobi's progress so far. "They've mainly focussed on Ninjutsu, as that is Echiko's strengths. In the short one month period, they've nearly doubled the original amount of chakra in Echiko-san's body could hold, which is an astonishing achievement in and of itself. But overall, she is still as hot headed as she was at the start of the exam. If I am to guess, I would say she's at mid-Chuunin to low-jounin level in offensive strength, but genin-level when it comes to strategy and tactics."

"Thank you all for all your reports. Now, let's move on to some other topics of discussion before tomorrow's tournament. What is the latest update on my aunt's condition?" Naruto asked promptly, as if purposely leaving something important out of the loop (12).

This time, it was Seiko who answered. "My mother has looked her over several times in the last week. Lady Ruri is now able to move around as she so wish; however, it will be dangerous for her to use chakra or any jutsu. It would be for the best if she refrain from using the Yochigan or undertake any further sealing for at least another few weeks. However, with Kaga-san's help, she should be able to attend the Chuunin Exam tournament, no problem."

"Good." Lifting himself completely off the couch, Naruto turned around to face all his followers. "A few days from now, the Kuunoki no Sato will hold the first Chuunin Exam tournament in the city of Bai Ling. All of you will need to be present for the opening and subsequent battles. I expect you to handle all the security details as well as protect both the combatants, viewers and my aunt from any enemies using this opportunity to attack us while we're in the open."

Jubei frowned slightly at Naruto's words. "Naruto-sama, what about yourself? I have heard that Sakura-san and Shikamaru-kun has asked permission from their various teachers whether or not they would be able to attend the event and watch the tournament, but you never mentioned whether or not you will be going as well to Bai Ling?"

Naruto nodded. "That is true. I never mentioned going because I have no intention of going to Bai Ling at all."

This was news to the Gate Guardians as they have been under the assumption that Naruto would be attending the tournament as a representative of the Air, just like Ruri. "Then, where will you be, Naruto-sama? Will you remain here in the Kuunoki?" Hikari asked in curiosity.

Naruto shook his head. "No, I intend to take a personal trip somewhere on my own." Raising his hand in an effort to forestall any further outbursts, Naruto continued with his explanation. "It is not safe for me here in the Kuunoki, nor is it safe for me anywhere on the Elemental countries. I need to find an isolated, safe place in order to train myself fully in the demon arts. I have grasped everything that Aunt Ruri wished to teach me. Anything further must be learnt on my own. And between Kyuubi and myself, I believe I would be able to survive."

"But Naruto-sama. You need at least one of us to follow you for protection. Any one of us would be willing to follow you into hell. Even Kaga-san..." Koushiro's heated words were cut off abruptly when Naruto interrupted him.

"Enough. That is all I will say regarding this issue. You will ALL attend to the Chuunin tournament and help protect my aunt. I, on the other hand, will use this opportunity to slip away without notice. Be very wary of potential enemies using this exam to infiltrate us. I know for a fact that the Akatsuki may come again to try and get their hands on the Kyuubi. It is imperative that I manage to escape their grasp. Do you understand?!" Naruto's firm voice commanded, and the guardians had no choice but to acquiesce to his demands.

"HAI!" A series of voices erupted from the Gate Guardians in acknowledgement.

"Good. Then tomorrow's event is a go. Everyone to your stations; you all know what you must do!" Naruto's commanding voice called out once more, resulting in another chorus of "Hais" before everyone disappeared in a swirl of wind, leaving Naruto on his own.

"And so ends this chapter of my life, but the trails of faith has just begun." Naruto mutters under his breath, eyes glazed as if looking far away into the future.

The next day found all the genins standing excitedly outside the front gates of the Kuunoki village, waiting for the Gate guardians to have everything in order before they make their way through one of Jubei's useful transportation rings to the city of Bai Ling where the final tournament was to be held.

The eight combatants all stood at the front of the group as they were meant to go first, leaving the rest of the genins whom had made it to the exam in the first place to stand and chat. Surprisingly, even with their difference, the group as a whole had come together to form a strange union among themselves. They weren't friends per say, but they were close enough to call each other colleagues, contemporaries or as equals. Even traditional enemies like those from Konoha against those from Hidden Cloud and Hidden Stone, had somehow come together and formed an understanding. Perhaps it was the collective experiences that they all shared as per their

participation here. Or perhaps it was due to the 'team' exam they undertook during the second stage. Whatever the reason, all the genins have come to understand and accept one another's existence. These levels of tolerance between people from such different backgrounds have never been seen before, and such are the seeds of the future.

Walking towards Hikon standing on her own, Naruto introduced himself in an informal manner. "Hi!"

Hikon, having already recognised the Uzumaki heir from the many official functions, gatherings and events, was unsure of why he had approached her here. "Um... Hello, Uzumaki-sama."

Naruto waved the 'title' away. "You can call me Naruto if we're meeting informally. It's only during events that I have to be called that. And truthfully, I hate it, it makes me feel old."

Somewhat relaxing after Naruto's rant, Hikon decided to quell her curiosity straight away since the Uzumaki heir did seem friendly enough. "So, what brings you here, Naruto-san."

Naruto let that title slide and went straight to the point of his visit. "Ano, I'd like to ask you a question. It's regarding the land of Snow Country, or what use to be Snow Country. I'd like to ask if you know of any place in Snow Country that is still completely made of ice; as in it doesn't have any land or soil beneath the ice's surface."

"Hmm..." Hikon thought for a moment before remembering that there is such a place. "Yes, there's one island on the outskirts of Spring Country territory. It's basically an iceberg that was somehow anchored into place some decades ago by the Shinobi of the Snow village. Kazehana Dotou (13) used it as a training ground for us; what was once known as the camp for the assassin squads. I'm glad it was closed down and demolished a year ago."

"I see, so this place is on the outskirts? Which direction?" Naruto asked again for more clarification this time.

"Why are you interested in this place?" Hikon asked back in curiosity, mind already drifting away from the painful memories of the past.

Naruto only gave her a mysterious smile. "Just humour me, please?"

Giving a sigh, Hikon answered to the best of her knowledge. "It's on the northern most tip of the Spring country, a little island on its own. It's a very dangerous trip on boat as the seas are very rough around that area, prone to wild waves and strong winds too. Very few boats venture out that far, other than the fishing boats catching giant crabs and such. It's about a 3 day trip from the main Spring Country Island."

"I understand. Thank you very much for the information." Naruto gave a grateful smile, bowed politely and started leaving Hikon, making his way back towards the gate guardians near the transportation portal.

"What a strange guy?" Hikon muttered to herself before she and the other genins were finally ushered through the portal and suddenly walked into the city of Bai Ling.

The city of Bai Ling was a small but prosperous city residing in what was known as 'neutral' territory, located in between River country, Wind Country and Fire Country. It's a sovereign state in its own right, governed by a council of civilians. It holds no allegiance to any of the Shinobi nations, and gained most of its economic wealth through trade and merchants. So it was surprising to find that Bai Ling actually had a full scale stadium located on the western side of the city. Supposedly, the stadium was mainly used as a sports, recreational and entertainment facility (14), enabling the rich citizens of Bai Ling to watch as rival sporting teams compete against one another, or to hold concerts and international conferences for trade shows and such.

Having booked the Bai Ling convention stadium for the use of the Kuunoki Chuunin Selection Exam, the Gate Guardians had done a

considerable amount of work revamping the original stadium so it could withstand the force and power of Shinobi battles. At the same time, the Gate Guardians and several Kuunoki citizens (mostly those of the Dokudes Clan) were also in charge of security and the overall running of the event.

Standing tall on the VIP platform and holding a microphone to her lips, Ruri's voice echoed through out the massive stadium, amplified a thousand times by the various speakers situated all over the structure.

"Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen! To the first ever Chuunin Selection Examination hosted by the Kuunoki Gakure no Sato. As per all Chuunin Exam tournaments, I hereby welcome some of our very important guests that have made time out of their very heavy schedules in order to attend this function. To my left are the Godaime Hokage - Tsunade, Princess Koyuki of the late-Snow Country, now renamed Spring Country and a high council representative from Suna – Chiyo-sama. To my right, are the Yondaime Tsukikage, a council representative from the Hidden Grass village – Kusanagi Hiroku and Godaime Raikage. We also have many important guests and daimyos attending this international event and lets not forget all the spectators that made it to the stadium just to attend this special event. I welcome you all!"

A huge roar erupted from the audience in response to Ruri's speech. Thousands of spectators were clapping, whistling; some even screaming in encouragement and for attention, supporting the various genin combatants to do their best. Suffice to say, there would be a lot of money put into bets for today's fights.

Raising a hand to calm the crowd into silence once more, Ruri began the next part of her prepared speech. Looking at the 8 genins standing in the middle of the arena ring, Ruri gave them an uncharacteristically encouraging smile. "For all the genin-hopefuls that have made it to the Kuunoki, let me say this. In all my years as the Lady Oracle and chief of the Air village, I have never seen a group of youngsters with as much talent and potential as you all. You

should be proud of yourselves for making it this far, and even prouder that you have done so much in representing your native countries, showcasing your countries skills and hopefully gaining economic support for your countries of origin in the future. This event, is not just about boosting your countries standing in power, it is also about your own accomplishments and recognising your achievements. You all have the potential to be powerful; how far you go is now up to you. This is your chance to show the world what you are made up."

Once again, the crowd goes wild in support of both the genins that have made it thus far and for the organisers of such a large international event. It took a while longer for Ruri to calm the crowd but eventually quieten they did. "Without further ado, let the games of the Kuunoki Chuunin Examination Tournament BEGIN!"

The resulting roar was deafening.

xxx XXX xxx **(Match 1)**

xxx XXX xxx **(Sabaku no Gaara Vs Rensa Ahiru)**

"First match, Sabaku no Gaara versus Rensa Ahiru, Hajime!" Kaga, once again acting as the referee of the match, announced through his own microphone as he swiftly stands aside when Ahiru readied herself to attack the Sand Nin.

"My rock versus your sand, I wonder who would win?" Ahiru tilted her head in curiosity, while Gaara simply stood straight with his arms cross, not even batting an eye. Without warning, clouds of sand rose out of his trusty gourd and instantly rushed towards Ahiru, wanting to crush her bones.

Ahiru ducked down to a fighter's stance and stomped her foot hard against the ground. In response, a giant boulder suddenly rose up in front of her, easily blocking Gaara's sand that slammed into it. Giving a feral yell, Ahiru punched the boulder that was protecting her, launching it off the ground and flying forward towards Gaara's

surprised form. The boulder was flying so fast that Gaara knew his sand wouldn't be able to catch up and as such, he was forced to dodge. Once landing from his dodge, Gaara was a little distracted as he watched the once mighty boulder crumble and scattered upon impact with the ground.

"You should never show an enemy your back!" Ahiru's voice called out from behind him. Instinctively, a wall of sand erupted to protect him and it barely managed to stop Ahiru's chakra enhanced kick, and even then, much of the sand wall were blown apart by Ahiru's force. Jumping back once more away from the dangerous Kunoichi, Gaara raised one of his hands towards the girl, and immediately the sand followed his command by wrapping itself around Ahiru's form. "Sabaku Kyuu! (Desert Coffin!)" He warned threateningly.

However, just before the sand could engulf Ahiru's entire body, she used chakra strings to attach small to medium size rocks from beneath the ground. Calling these rocks up to the surface, the hardened soil quickly surrounded her body and compacted itself, forming an armour of rock protecting her from the crushing sand.

Not believing that his sand would fail him, Gaara shut his fist tightly. "Sabaku Souso! (Dessert Graveyard!)" However, instead of the expected splatter of blood everywhere, nothing happened. In fact, the sand covered form of Ahiru didn't even compress at all.

"Heh! Your sand isn't the only hard stuff around here." Ahiru taunted. And as if wanting to prove her point, she summoned her chakra once more and gave a heave, the sand wrapped tightly around her gave way and blew apart as she released both her chakra and physical force. Her rock armour crumbled to the floor as it was no longer needed.

Once again surprised at the girl's resourcefulness, Gaara quickly refocussed all his attention on the fight. Slamming his hands together in front of him, he called forth all the sand in the surrounding. "Sabaku Ryuusa! (Dessert Avalanche)" Waves upon

waves of sand rose up behind him and rushed towards Ahiru's small form, intended to bury her in sand.

However, unlike doing what most people would do, which would be to escape the sand; Ahiru simply stood still and waited for the sand to slam into her, which it did unmercifully. Slamming his hands hard to the sand on the ground, Gaara released a second technique.

"Sabaku Taisou (Desert Requiem)!" The earth vibrated in response to Gaara's call, and he was pretty sure he had won the match, only to be surprised once again.

Gaara felt something tug at his pants leg, forcefully pulling himself into the sand. Gaara looked down to find metallic chains wrapped around his ankle and it seemed to be pulling him towards a giant, stone beetle's gapping jaws, supposedly to be eaten. Gaara knew instantly that this was a summoned creature by Ahiru, which meant the Rock girl wasn't dead yet. Calling forth his sand once more from under the creature, Gaara had it form a giant spike that suddenly rose up and pierced right through the giant insect's body, forcing it to disperse into nothingness.

"Wow! You're the first person ever to escape my Doton: Arijigoku no Wana no Jutsu (Earth Element: Ant Lion's Trap Technique)." Ahiru's voice sounded amazed from some distance away from Gaara, having made her way out of the sand and stood seemingly unhurt by Gaara's previous attacks.

Gaara's eyes narrowed in irritation. "How did you escape my attack?" He asked snappishly.

In contrast, Ahiru only gave him a grin. "I'm a Stone Ninja; you think we don't know how to move under ground? It's like second nature to us!" She replied back in a taunting voice. "Now, it's my turn!" Raising her feet, Ahiru slammed it down onto the sand covered ground once more with a chakra enhanced kick, calling for any small to big sized boulders with her chakra alone. Within less than a second, dozens of boulders ranging from the size of a small dog to a life sized horse rose out beneath the sand like floating objects. Now, it's just a matter

of Ahiru punching each and every one towards Gaara's location, making each boulder (no matter the size) into high speed projectiles ready to smash Gaara's face in.

Some distance away, Gaara was busy dodging or blocking Ahiru's multi sized boulders with his sand. He knew he was wasting time and energy on this fight and he wanted to finish it as soon as possible. Calling his sand beneath his feet, Gaara quickly made his way into the air, having a much easier time dodging Ahiru's projectiles now that he had plenty of space to dodge to.

Ahiru growled fiercely as she realised her tactic wasn't working on a flying Gaara. Instead, with Gaara's new found height and freedom, he switched the advantage of the entire match, using his sand to attack Ahiru from the air. Now, it was Ahiru's turn to dodge, block and avoid Gaara's high speed sand. She had to jump, rebound off boulders or the walls of the arena, only to continue running in order to escape Gaara's grasp. She was tiring and she knew it. */ One more big attack is pretty much all I can do now. /* She thought to herself as she measured her chances.

Ahiru already knew Gaara was incredibly strong, having watched his matches in the Second stage of the Chuunin Exam a month ago. But she truly underestimated her opponent. Now, with the tables turned, she knew she had a very low chance of winning at all, but as a Kunoichi of the Stone village, she refused to go down until the very end. */ If I'm gonna lose anyway, I'm gonna lose with style! /* She thought to herself with finality, before suddenly changing her course and rushing directly towards Gaara, performing a chakra enhanced jump all the way up to Gaara's height.

"Take this!" Ahiru shouted as her beloved chains released itself from her arms via the direction of chakra strings, launching itself towards the surprised form of Gaara, it wrapped tightly around the Suna Shinobi. "ARRRRHHHH!" Ahiru screamed as she pulled Gaara's trapped form off his sand platform all the way towards the earth and slamming the boy (back first) onto the broken ground beneath, causing a giant eruption of dust and debris, as well as causing crater

ten metres in diameter. "Did I do it?" Ahiru asked herself as she staggered to her knees, having used the last of chakra to help her land softly onto the ground without injuring herself.

"Nice try, but no, this isn't enough." Ahiru didn't even get a chance to turn around when she felt Gaara's hand snap at her neck, knocking her unconscious instantly. Gaara glared at his Suna bunshin that had taken his place when Ahiru attacked, had he not switched places with that bunshin, that attack would have hurt him a lot.

The crowd went wild, even as Kaga tried to call above all the sound and noise, announcing Gaara as the winner of the first match.

"Hehe. Look Itachi, the Ichibi is here as well. Shall we nab both the Kyuubi and Ichibi Jinchuriki?" Kisame chuckled as he watched the end of Gaara's match. Itching for a fight, the ex-Mist Shinobi was hoping to challenge another member of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians at some point today. But considering their orders from the Akatsuki Leader were to undertake some espionage and information gathering, it seems rather conflicting if they made their presence known so quickly by exposing themselves.

"lie. We are to gather information about the current level of strength on both the Ichibi and the Kyuubi Jinchuriki. That is all. And if an opportunity arises, we are to kidnap Naruto-kun. But as you've heard from Pein-sama, that is of a low priority compared to the information gathering." Itachi's monotone voice answered smoothly.

"Yare yare. And I was so looking for a good fight." Kisame turned away from the now finished battle, just in time to see Itachi walked through another walkway. "Oi. Where are you going? I thought we're supposed to stand here and watch the rest of the show to gauge the brat's strengths?" Kisame called out to Itachi's retreating back.

"We have already accounted for Gaara-kun's strength. You can stay here, wait and watch for his next match. I am going to confront

Naruto-kun." And with that statement, Itachi disappeared into the crowd.

"Che." Kisame grunted in annoyance as he leaned heavily against the pillar he was standing against, knowing that there was nothing he could say that would change Itachi's mind.

xxx XXX xxx **(Match 2)**

xxx XXX xxx **(Naja Daiku Vs Aburame Shino)**

"Hajime!"

Shino raised his arms calmly as a swarm of Kikaichu insects appeared and swirled around his limbs in readiness for the match. Daiku simply pulled out a small blue scroll, biting his thumb; he wiped a line of blood on the outside of the scroll, before ripping the edge of it opened and dropping it onto the ground without further worth. Shino frowned at his actions, having no clue as to why Daiku would seemingly summon something from a scroll and then drop it as if it was worthless. His curiosity was answered when an instant later, water slowly began to bubble and flood out of the scroll, staining the ground and making a small pool of water directly beneath Daiku's feet.

Performing a quick set of seals, Daiku didn't give Shino any time to prepare as he began the attack. "Aisu Shin no Jutsu! (Ice Needles!)" Small droplets of water rose into the air from the pool staining his feet, and quickly froze into sharp ice needles. Hundreds of such ice needles were then flung automatically towards Shino's form.

"Mushikame no Jutsu (Bug jar)" The swarm of Kikaichu insects flew around Shino, creating a rotational shield and easily protected the Aburame heir from the deadly ice needles. Unfortunately for Shino however, the shield of Kikaichu insects also obstructed his view of what Daiku was up to at this moment in time, resulting in him being too late to react when he finally noticed several kunais flying his way with ice bombs attached to them. He barely made it in time to

escape the giant shards of ice that erupted when the bombs made contact with his technique, resulting in quite a number of his Kikaichu insects trapped in the frozen sculpture. Suffice to say, Shino was not pleased.

However, he didn't have time to berate himself on his woes, as Daiku suddenly slid behind him, in the literal sense of 'sliding' on the ice that he had frozen beneath his feet, creating a ice 'path' from where he was stationed before to the location currently behind Shino. Acting quickly, Shino replaced himself with a Mushi Bunshin just as Daiku threw several kunais into his chest, and the bunshin burst into another swarm of Kikaichu.

Twisting his head quickly one way and then another, Daiku was feeling suspicious when he couldn't detect Shino's presence near him. That was when he heard the noise of many bugs above him. Looking up, Daiku's mouth literally dropped as he witnessed the form of Shino floating in mid air due to a pair of delicate insect-like wings behind him flapping in a constant motion.

No longer holding back any of his newly learnt skills, Shino raised one of his arms and swarm of Kikaichu immediately covered it and lengthen to form a long, black, whip like appendage. Swinging his now black whip-like arm, Shino swung it in the direction of Daiku, who had to quickly jump back away from the deadly appendage as it sliced apart some of the boulders left behind from the previous fight in its attempt to catch Daiku.

Not wanting to be caught by Shino's attack, the Snow Shinobi decided to distract the Aburame heir in order to get close to him once more, or attack from a different angle using a long range technique. Quickly performing a set of seals while he had the time, Daiku summoned a blizzard in order to obstruct Shino's perception. "Fubuki no Jutsu (Snowstorm Technique)." He then followed behind that with another set of seals in conjunction with the first. "Hyoton Tsubame no Fubuki. (Ice Element: Swallow Blizzard)!"

Both the snow blizzard and its following swallow blizzard were formed from using the water supplied by the small blue croll, which was still bubbling water even as the battle went on. The summoned water was slowly but surely flooding the entire arena, leaving some of the watching audiences wondering how come such a small scroll could contain so much water it was ridiculous.

While the first blizzard technique effortlessly obstructed Shino's vision, the second technique – ice swallows – flying through the air targeted Shino's delicate looking wings. As expected, the ice birds sliced through the winged appendage without effort, and Shino dropped dangerously without his support. Unfortunately for Daiku, Shino had somehow managed to perform bunshin once again leaving a mushi bunshin behind to scatter into insects just before his body smashed into the ground.

Daiku then released the Blizzard as he too needed enough visualisation on his opponent's location in order to win this match. From behind Daiku, Shino's calm voice called spoke out. "Mushi Yari (Insect Spear)." A long, sharp, black thing suddenly jutted out towards Daiku's back and the snow nin had no choice but perform his own bunshin and kawarimi in order to escape.

Shino frowned when his insects that made up the 'Insect Spear' were suddenly trapped inside an Ice Bunshin after they managed to pierce right through Daiku's frozen body. */ Damn, I lost another set of Kikaichu, my hive is reduced to 60 percent of its original numbers. /* Shino thought forlornly as he reformed his insect wings and rose into the air, easily dodging more kunai flung his way by Daiku trying to act sneaky. Turning slightly, Shino took out his own kunai and flung it with precision, piercing the small scroll that was still releasing water like a gushing fountain. The moment, his kunai cut the scroll in half, the water stopped flowing out; meaning that Daiku would no longer have his unlimited supply of water to use for his ice techniques. Now, this match had suddenly become a battle of attrition.

/ Damn it. This isn't working. We're playing a game of cat and mouse. The moment I run out of chakra or water, I lose. The moment

he runs out of chakra or usable bugs, he lose. But I don't want to wait fucking hours before the two of us run out of steam. There's got to be something I can do to win. Think! / Daiku chastised himself even as he dodged another black whip formed by Shino's insects. Turning around quickly, he launched another three kunai with ice bombs attached to them, before looking forward once more and running a little faster to escape the resulting blast. Suffice to say, he was short three ice bombs and Shino was short another 5 to 10 percent of his Kikaichu count. Suddenly, a light bulb went up in Daiku's head. / *Yes, there's that thing that I can try! I've got to be careful though because this will probably use up my entire stash of water that I have left. Let's just hope that Shino, with his analytical mind does not discover what I'm doing before it's too late to stop me.* /

Turning abruptly from his straight running, Daiku dashed fast in an angular direction, literally running in a big, round circle around Shino's flying form in the middle of it. Shino didn't notice though as he was too busy, focusing the last of his insects in order to form two long whip like appendages to take off Daiku's head or legs.

Daiku on the other hand, had finally finished his preparation. Sliding to a stop at the point where he first started running in a circle, it was then that Shino noticed the ice that travelled across the left over pool of water on the ground. It formed a perfect circle. Knowing this was probably some sort of trap, Shino quickly tried to fly out of the ring of ice, even though Daiku and his ice was on the wet ground, while Shino was up some twenty to thirty metres in the air, Shino still didn't feel safe. However, by that time, it was too late to escape. "Hyoton: Kori Kagami Wana Ringu (Ice Element: Ice Mirror Trap Ring) (15)."

Shino suddenly felt the very air around him compress and freeze. He tried desperately to move out of the way, but it was too late. His legs had started becoming encrusted with ice. The ice formed from thin air, from the condensation of the water vapour in the atmosphere and rendered into ice by Daiku temperature manipulation. It took only a few second before Shino found himself completely encased in

ice. The water upon the ground was gone, all used up for this one single technique. Andy with his wings also encased in ice, Shino was no longer able to fly. Suffice to say, he crash landed rather hard on the ground.

"Kaga-san. I suggest you declare a winner soon, as Shino-kun won't be able to live without oxygen if he stays encased too long." Daiku announced breathlessly, having used a large amount of his chakra storage for this one technique. Kaga followed his prompting, declaring Shino unable to battle and hence Daiku's victory. Shino was then released from the jutsu and the two boys struggled out of the arena to rest, encouraged by the loud cheering of the crowd.

"Hmph. Looks like Konoha Shinobis have truly fallen over the ages. Their only Genin representative in this exam is beaten by a no-name Ninja from the Snow village of all places. I suppose ice can certainly smother the energy of fire." Chiyo directed her snide comments towards Tsunade, who was sitting on the right hand side of Koyuki, while Chiyo herself was sitting on the left side of Koyuki.

Koyuki frowned, having found herself acting as a human barrier between two rival Kunoichis and not appreciating a single moment of it. "Daiku-kun is *not* a no-name Shinobi. He comes from a famous clan that have served the royal family of Snow loyally for generations. I do not appreciate you putting other people's Shinobi down just because they come from a less than famous place." Koyuki snapped back rather aggressively.

"I agree. Considering that out of the 10 genin teams that actually made it to the Kuunoki exams, 3 of those teams came from Konoha, while one made it from Suna, you really don't have much to be proud of. I'll admit, Gaara, Temari and Kankuro are exceptional genins. But so are all the other genins that have made it so far. They truly are the best of the best. And I for one, look forward to watching their growth from this point forth." Tsunade gave a confident smirk towards Chiyo and then refocussed her attention back to the arena floor.

"Hmph." Chiyo grunted but remained silent for the rest of the tournament.

xxx XXX xxx **(Match 3)**

xxx XXX xxx **(Yuse Samure Vs Sabaku no Temari)**

"Fuuton: Hono Bakuha! (Wind Element: Fire Blast!)" Swinging her left handed fan around her in an elegant arc, Temari focussed her own wind elemental chakra into the fan, mixing it with the fire elemental conversion seal, before releasing the chakra in a wave of flames, rapidly speeding towards Samure's defensive form.

Quickly throwing a small blue scroll into the air directly in front of him, Samure performed a set of seals in seconds to counteract Temari's assault. "Kuchiyose Misu! Suiton: Suijin Heki! (Summoning Water! Water element: Water Barrier technique!)"

The summoned water gushed out of the seemingly delicate scroll before rushing to surround Samure, forming a powerful wall of water, stopping Temari's attack in an instant. Behind his protective barrier, Samure was unable to see Temari smirk at his response.

"Heh, you just played straight into my hands. Fuuton: Koraseru no Jutsu! (Wind Element: Freeze technique!)" Once again, channelling her wind based chakra into her right hand fan this time, Temari discharged a flood of freezing air, which upon contact against Samure's water shield immediately froze the once liquid barrier into a mountain of ice, perfectly vulnerable to Temari's next attack. "Kamaitachi!" Diverting her chakra into both fans one last time, but maintaining their original wind element without mixing it with the conversion seals, Temari swung both fans in a cross direction, unleashing wave upon waves of deadly wind blades slashing their way across the air, and splitting the now frozen ice barrier into thousands of pieces. "Heh. I win." Temari smirked in a deadly fashion, eyes blazing with victory.

"Temari-san, you should know better than to underestimate your opponent." A male voice spoke behind her. Temari tried to duck, dodge or simply move out of the way of an impending attack from her unharmed opponent, but it was all in vein. "Kyosei Suimin no Jutsu! (Forced Sleep technique) (16)" With a simple tap of his hands against Temari's shoulders, the sand Kunoichi could feel her grip on reality fade. Her vision darkened instantly until she could not open her eyes anymore, and she vaguely felt her body dropping unevenly onto the hard ground. Nothing else filtered through her mind but silent darkness.

"Sabaku no Temari is unable to battle, I pronounce Yuse Samure the winner of match 3."

xxx XXX xxx (**Warning: Death of a character**)

"Man... What's a guy to do to be rid of boredom?" Kisame whined to himself as he slouched gracelessly against another pillar, completely bored out of his mind for the last hour sitting around and doing nothing. He had watched the matches, but watching and not actually participating in the fight wasn't nearly as fun, hence the boredom. However, Kisame's boredom was quickly interrupted by the 3 new presences coming his way.

"Ano. Why are we walking this way again? We're on the other side of the stadium where the exam participants are supposed to sit?" A young, male's voice asked hesitantly.

"Ah. Come on, Juro-kun! Grow a bit of backbone. We're just exploring the place! I mean, you'll never see such modern structure in the boring Mist village. Hell, we can barely see anything in the Mist." Another voice, female this time, ranted in irritation.

"I agree with Juro-kun, Echiko. We should go back. I have a bad feeling, like why is this corridor completely dark and empty. It's just not right." A third voice - male but older than the first - spoke in a slightly nervous voice.

"Ah! Not you too, Eiji-niisan! You're all a bunch of chickens the lot of you!" The female voice complained loudly once more.

Grinning in a sadistic way, Kisame decided to scare the crap out of the brats all because he could. */ After all, what Itachi-san doesn't know can't hurt him. And anyway, these kids are annoying. /*

Using Shunshin to transport himself behind the three genins, Kisame grinned widely, exposing his sharp shark-like teeth before snapping loudly with a 'BOO!' Unsurprisingly, the three teens jumped in fright and screamed loudly.

"AHAHAHAHA!! God! I've still got it." Kisame's amusement at the kid's antics quickly dried away as he recognised the bandaged sword strapped tightly onto the little red-head's back. "That's... the Tsunami no Sakebu! (Wave's Cry)! Where the hell did you get that, BRAT!?" Kisame roared upon seeing the familiar sword, a flood of painful memories emerged as a result of seeing that sword once more.

Juro gripped tightly onto his grandfather's sword, knowing that if this valuable sword was stolen or damaged in anyway, his grandfather would skin him alive. Stepping back from the deadly looking Shinobi in a black cloak with strange red clouds lining it, Juro was relieved that both Eiji and Echiko stepped in front of him (as always) to protect him from any harm.

"Who the FXXK are you?! And how dare you scare us like that! Do you have any idea who we are?! We're the best Hidden Mist Shinobi in the building right this moment, so you better not mess with us?" Echiko's cocky announced, completely missing her older brother's soft mummer of "We're the only Hidden Mist Shinobi in the building; the Mizukage didn't send any representation to the exam as none of us qualified for the tournament."

Kisame paid no attention to the two violet haired twins; instead he had his full attention to the little red haired boy. "Those bi-coloured bangs, you're a member of the Kapasu clan, aren't you Gaki!? And

by your age, you're probably Genjiro's grandson. So how is the old bastard doing? Still following that traitor of the Mizukage like the lost puppy that he is (17)?!" Kisame taunted, finding it difficult to suppress the raging hate that was just desperate to be released.

"Hey. Don't just go and insult our Mizukage and Kapasu-Osan! They're both way above your league, Shark-face!" Echiko's latest insult finally snapped Kisame's control on his temper.

"That's it! You brats are DEAD!" Kisame roared, unleashing his fury. Slamming the samehada onto the ground and leaving it standing in the newly created hole, Kisame launched into a set of seals before shouting his jutsu: "Suiton! Bakusouha! (Water Element! Aquatic Shockwave!)" Taking a deep breath, Kisame let loose a flood of water from his mouth. The mountain of water slammed into the unsuspecting genins, smashing them against the corridor's walls, and flooding the entire hallway until everything and everyone was submerged in water.

Not wasting a single second, Kisame launched into another set of seals to be rid of the brats fast, hopefully before he was spotted by any of the gate guardians. "Suiton! Goshoku Zame! (Water Element! Five Shard Feeding Frenzy!)" Lifting his palm open, Kisame summoned 5 giant sharks like creates and mentally commanded them to go after the brats and eat their fill.

Eiji, being the first to recover from being smashed against a corridor wall, was at first frantic when he realised he was underwater and unable to take in any air supply. However, after the initial panic, Eiji realised that he was just as much at home in the water as he was outside. Pulling out his trusting "Breathing Mechanism (18)," attaching it to his mouth, Eiji breathed in deeply. Relaxing somewhat, Eiji decided to go find his other teammates and was just moments away from reaching a struggling Juro when he noticed the 5 chakra sharks coming their way.

Acting in instinct, Eiji performed some quick hand seals and formed chakra scalpels with both his hands. With agility learnt from spending

years learning how to fight underwater, Eiji swam towards the shark in a frontal assault, knowing that he had to defeat them if he wanted any chance to protect Juro. Swiftly dodging the sharp teeth of one of the sharks as it tried to take a bite out of him, Eiji managed to dodge beneath the creature, swinging his arms in a straight line across the creature's neck; he effectively sliced the sharks head from the rest of its body with his elongated chakra scalpels. Instantly, the shark puffed out of existence.

With one of the sharks destroyed, Eiji still had 4 more to take care of. Cautiously dodging another attack, Eiji sliced across the length of the second sharks body, effect cutting right through the shark's belly and intestines, immediately killing the creature. */ Two down, three to go! /* Eiji mentally counted.

Safely behind Eiji, Juro has just managed to put his breathing mechanism on, and was watching his teammates with awe in his eyes. However, mentally, he was berating himself for his weakness, having not done a single thing to help his teammates, and still physically unable to react due to his loathsome fear of fighting and blood. */ I'm such a burden to both Eiji and Echiko. I'm so weak! I should have never become a ninja, and then I won't be on a team with Eiji and Echiko. Then, they wouldn't need to protect me all this time. God! I'm pathetic. /* Although Juro's mental voice was strong in it's self-reprimanding; he was still too fearful and nervous to take any action in helping his friend.

"Suiton! Suiryuudan no Jutsu! (Water Element! Water Dragon Missile!)" Echiko's voice vibrated through the water via the breathing mechanism as she finished her technique. Two underwater dragons were formed from Echiko's outstretched hands and flung themselves at two of Kisame's summoned sharks. Suffice to say, the four destroyed each other as they impacted against one another. "Yes! I did it! Four down, just one to go!" Unfortunately for Echiko, it was at that moment that the last shark attacked her from behind. Biting tightly onto Echiko outstretched punch, the shark mercilessly gripped

the appendage with its sharp teeth, tugged savagely and ripped Echiko's right arm right out from her shoulder socket.

Echiko's horror and pain-filled scream reverberated through out the underwater corridor as blood gushed out of her open wound in torrents, staining the pool of water in mass of red.

Juro froze upon seeing the familiar red liquid and panicked. Screeching hysterically, Juro flung himself to the furthest corner away from the bleeding and possibly dying Echiko just because of his fear of blood. Juro just simply could not contain his hysteria, not even enough to help out his dearest friend.

Eiji, on the other hand, had rushed towards his sister and in a desperate bid to save her life, focussed almost all his energy into healing chakra and tried to close the giant gapping wound. He succeeded to some extent, only to be distracted when he noticed the last shark coming back for another snack. By this time, Echiko was desperately weak from blood lost and shock, she was barely conscious.

Upon seeing the shark once more, Eiji lost all control on his anger. "YOU **BASTARD** !!!!!" Using his newly learnt skills of Chakra shape-manipulation, Eiji silently created three invisible, but deadly sharp chakra blades, similar in shape to Senbon needles. Seemingly throwing it through the water currents, the chakra enforced blades sliced through the currents as if it was air, and struck the shark on its head. Instantly, the shark's brain blew up as Eiji mentally commanded his needles to explode. The resulting mesh of brain, meat and muscle quickly disappeared into a cloud of smoke as the shark was dispelled.

"Oi. I don't appreciate people causing my pets pain, especially the pain felt when their brains literally explode on them." Kisame's angry voice threatened from behind Eiji. Eiji tried to dodge, he tried to turn around and deflect or attack his opponent. He was too late.

Juro watched in muted shock as Kisame slammed his giant sword, the samehade right through Eiji's chest and coming out the other end. Eiji was still alive at this point, the sword missed his heart but it punctured right through his ribcage, stomach, liver and even his spinal cord. Kisame gave the stunned boy a nastic grin as he ripped his sword out of the boy's body once more, shaving off a large of amount of flesh, blood and gore in the attempt, tainting the pool of water with even more blood.

/ Shit! Even as a medic ninja, I can't... I won't be able to... heal this amount of damage... Juro, Echiko... I'm sorry I failed. / Eiji's last thought faded away as he died in the now silent, blood stained water.

" **NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!** " Echiko had somehow regained enough focus to watch as her twin brother was brutally massacred right in front of her. Kisame wasn't sure whether it was due to the girl's loud scream, or whether it was due to another reason, but a few members of the Gate Guardian chose that moment to interrupt his fun by smashing a hole through the corridor, letting the pool of water gush out in a swift flood.

"Hoshigaki Kisame. For daring to try and kidnap the Uzumaki heir, disrupting the Kuunoki Chuunin Exam, the killing of an exam participant and harming of another, I sentence you to death." Mishizu Kaiba's eyes were as cold as ice as she gazed upon Kisame's frowning face. Behind her stood Yami Shinzo and Dokudes Seiko.

/ Damn. I don't think I can take on all three of them at the same time. It's time for me to leave. / Kisame concluded as he tried to think of a way to escape without further endangering himself.

xxx XXX xxx **(Match 4)**

xxx XXX xxx **(Sasayaki Kageru Vs Sakeyama Asahi)**

Asahi started the match off by summoning and twirling his trusty staff around his body in an offensive manner, before charging at Kageru attacking with the staff. Kageru, with the swiftness of a snake in

battle, gracefully dodged and ducked under Asahi's attack. She didn't retaliate, but she didn't get hit either. Asahi quickly became frustrated even as he expended most of his energy twisting and turning, twirling the staff and battering it against boulders, the ground, anything really; but he still couldn't hit Kageru. Even when he used the retractable knives on each end of the staff, plus the chains in between, he still couldn't hit her.

"Stand still. Damn it!" Asahi swore and still Kageru elegantly stayed unharmed. Feeling his anger rise to another level, Asahi broke off his assault and tried a different tactic. Taking out four wooden blocks, each with an image of an Ukiyo-e caricature drawn on it, Asahi's eyes never left Kageru's still form even as he quickly dabbed his name onto the backs of each of the floor blocks with an inked brush that he kept safe in his jacket. Having done that, Asahi performed a quick set of one-handed seals before slamming both the blocks and the hands onto the ground. "Ukiyo-e Shokan no Jutsu! (Ukiyo-e Art Technique)" A sudden burst of smoke clouds covered Asahi's form.

Once the cloud of smoke clears, there appear to be 4 life size, Ukiyo-e caricatures. One of them was wearing some sort of leopard skin, with two Katanas strapped to his waist and holding a spear in one hand. Another wore black and white clothes, also holding a spear but only had one katana strapped to his waist. The third caricature wore a samurai style helmet with chest armour, and using your standard two Katanas. The last one wore long, baggy blue and green clothing, again with two Katanas on hand (19).

"Attack!" Asahi commanded and all 4 summons attacked all at the same time. The helmet wearing summon swept his sword up in an attempt to cut Kageru in half. However, Kageru neatly sidestepped the attack, followed by twisting her body around the samurai figure in an S-shape fashion, similar to what a snake would do when capturing prey. Tightening her body's grip on the Samurai, her snake like eyes travelled quickly over his body before she found what she was looking for. Taking out a single kunai, she stabbed it to the caricature's underarm, and the affect was instant. The summon burst

into smoke, dispersing itself and leaving a simple wooden block on the ground.

"WHAT!" Asahi's exclamation was cut short, when directly following the first summons's destruction, Kageru ducked under the feet of another summon, grabbing onto its left foot, tripping the creature onto the ground. Kageru used the same kunai and stabbed the leopard skin swearing caricature's feet, and he too dispersed into smoke.

"HOW THE HELL DID YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO TO DISPURSE MY SUMMONS?!" Asahi's angry shout reverberated through out the arena, while Kageru simply stood up calmly.

She raised a delicate eyebrow in his direction but kept quiet, and that infuriated Asahi more than anything else. He hated being looked down upon. Not taking this fight easy anymore, Asahi raised his trusty Ida Ten staff and called out to his summons with his next order. "Cover me if she attacks." And the two mindless drones simply did as told, standing on Asahi's left and right side, ready to protect their master when danger comes. Lifting 'Ida Ten' until it's held in the palms of both his hands the way one would when playing against an opponent at the pool table. Eyes never leaving his opponent, Asahi focussed a pinpoint amount chakra to the base of the staff, heating it up and making that end glow a silent red in preparation for his attack. Kageru watched in muted silence. / *Ready, now!* / Asahi thought to himself even as he released the compressed fire-enhanced chakra inside the Ida Ten. "Fushichou Seikatsuba! (Phoenix Sacred Fire Spit!)" Asahi called out, but the attack had already been activated and the results were instantaneous. Even Kageru's eyes actually widened but she wasn't given any time to react when she was flung some hundreds of metres away by the impact of the compressed fire bullet that slammed into her body, burning away close to 30 percent of her chest area with second to third degree burns, and that's after she protected it with her own chakra buffering.

"I did it!" Asahi yelled in surprise. He never did like using Ida Ten's special attack as it always seem rather ruthless in nature. Not only that, but due to a lack of practice, he wasn't always sure his aim was precise enough to hit the target; like a sniper from hundreds of metres away, accuracy is everything. However, his joy disappeared as Kageru staggered to her feet. Her face and chest was blacked slightly and in some areas you could see the red muscles pulsing with her heartbeat and blood, other areas were just severely burnt. "My god." Asahi whispered to himself, both in awe and in fear. "You survived?"

"It'll take more than that to kill me..." Kageru commented as she stood and slowly started walking towards Asahi. Her eyes were gold and gleaming with both pain and anger. No one had ever seen Kageru angry before, and suffice the say, the look was beyond scary. Asahi wasn't sure whether these were Kageru's newly developed emotions, or just echoes of things felt by Suzumi. But one thing he was sure of, there was no way he could beat this girl.

Feeling danger coming their way, the two last summons suddenly launched themselves at Kageru, only to have the snake girl move in such speed that both were dispersed not a second later. Both Asahi and the watching audience gapped in astonishment. "I... I give up." Asahi announced suddenly when Kageru were only five metres away from him, knowing that this was the only way for him to survive; there was simply no other choice. Instantly, she stopped, her eyes fading into a vague confused expression.

That is, until Kaga announced that Asahi had lost the match and Kageru was declared the winner of this match.

"Hello Itachi-kun." Ruri stepped out of the shadowed surroundings to confront the wandering Uchiha.

Itachi's expression didn't change at all, hiding his surprise behind his emotionless façade perfectly. "Uzumaki Ruri." He addressed the Lady Oracle that had suddenly appeared in front of him. Shifting his

gaze slightly, Itachi used his Sharingan activated eyes to focus on the figure of Ruri that was still sitting at the VIP platform, before turning back to look at the second Ruri that was standing before him. "You're a shadow clone." He finally realised.

The Ruri clone gave him a sardonic smirk in reply. "Yes, I am." She confirmed.

Itachi's eyes narrowed slightly, wondering how to progress from here on end. "Are you trying to delay me, or stop me from taking Naruto-kun?" He asked, curious as to what the Lady Oracle was thinking.

Ruri shook her head negatively. "No. I'm just here to talk." She answered calmly.

"Talk?" Itachi repeated slightly in surprise. "Talk about what?"

Ruri's eyes darkened slightly. "About the future... About Pein."

Itachi shifted into a defensive stance in the empty hallway, ready for an attack at any time. "What about the future? And what about *him*?"

Ruri looked directly at Itachi's Sharingan eyes, knowing instinctively that the Uchiha wouldn't use his Mangekyo Sharingan against her. "I know that Yuuki spoke to you before her death. She told you about her visions, especially the vision regarding your future. Tell me, Itachi-kun. How far has your eyesight deteriorated? How much more damage can you take before you go completely blind?" She asked in an earnest voice.

Itachi shrugged nonchalantly. "I can see clearly up to 5 metre radius, anything beyond that is blurry." He answered truthfully.

Ruri gave him a sad smile as she raised her right palm until it was mere inches away from her face. "I can't see clearly beyond the distance of my hand. That is how far my own eyesight has deteriorated. (20)" She compared her own level of blindness against

that of the young Uchiha. "Please stop using the Mangekyo Sharingan. I know that Yuuki would not want you to destroy your body further."

Itachi shrugged again. "She's dead." He stated succinctly. "She won't care one way or the other what happens to me now."

Ruri frowned a little at Itachi's rudeness. "True. But you still care about what she would think of you. You still care about her opinions, even after her death."

Itachi shrugged for a third time but he didn't comment back.

xxx XXX xxx **(Match 5)**

xxx XXX xxx **(Sabaku no Gaara Vs Naja Daiku)**

"Oh man... Why me?" Daiku whined to himself as he stared at Gaara's passive form standing nonchalantly across from him. While Daiku had used up a large amount of chakra and exposed much of his new jutsus in his last match, Gaara's hadn't used up even 20 percent of his total energy, leaving Daiku in an obvious disadvantage coming into this match up. "Well, all I can do is to my best."

"Match 5, Sabaku no Gaara versus Naja Daiku, Hajime!"

Low on ice bombs and weary of using any of his larger attacks, especially without any good source of water on hand at the moment, Daiku opted to fight a Taijutsu only match, knowing that Gaara seemed to be abysmal in that field. "Get ready Gaara-san for I'm not holding back." Daiku warned as he held up both his fists in front on him in a boxing stance. Not wasting any time, Daiku rushed towards Gaara's still form with all his speed. Gaara didn't even have to raise a hand when his sand automatically reacted to the threat. Obviously, Daiku wasn't nearly as fast as Lee and was unable to move faster than Gaara's sand. However, with a focussed punch by Daiku's hand, the sand that blocked his entry suddenly froze into ice, enabling Daiku to duck beneath the frozen sand, twist and continue

on his way towards Gaara. Gaara didn't stay shocked for long as he summoned forth more sand to block Daiku's path, only to meet with the same fate. It seems that Daiku was focussing a lot more chakra into his fists, and with every touch, he freezes anything that comes into contact with him instantly.

Feeling that he's under threat, Gaara made an uncharacteristic move to retreat some distance away to avoid all close combat with Daiku. Having been cut off from his original sand that was still encased in ice and protected from his influence by Daiku's own chakra, Gaara had no choice but to call forth more sand from the ground. The new sand formed a platform beneath Gaara's feet and helped him rise up into the air, completely avoiding all Daiku's attempts to catch him with Taijutsu. Now that Gaara had the advantage in the air, he performed a quick list of hand seals. "Suna Shigure. (Sand Rain)." Gaara called forth, bullets of sand were then formed from beneath his floating sand platform and flew at Daiku at high speed. Jumping back by performing several summersaults, twisting and turning his body one way and then the other, Daiku somehow managed to avoid all damage caused by the sand rain. Pulling out some of his left over kunais, Daiku threw his own projectiles towards Gaara, only for it to be stopped by Gaara's sand once again.

/ Damn, this guy is hard to beat! / Daiku thought to himself as he ran through all his options mentally, and came up with a very small list of things he could do against Gaara. His situation was certainly looking grim. However, not being one to give up until the very end, Daiku grit his teeth and continued on. Standing up from his standard Hyoken (Ice Fist) stance, Daiku performed a list of hand seals and summoned as much of his chakra as was available. Lifting one hand out, and using his other hand to hold on to the first hand's wrist, Daiku concentrated his Chakra to form a long blade like object. Taking a few seconds to stabilise its shape, Daiku then added a little bit of his nature manipulation into the formation, and in an instant, his new chakra blade hardened into perfect ice. Smirking at Gaara slightly, Daiku answered: "This is a new technique. I call it Hyo no ken (Ice Sword)." Daiku swung his ice sword experimentally, pushing

more chakra into the blade and lengthening it until it was literally 30 metres in length. With its expanded length, Daiku easily manoeuvred it towards Gaara's floating island of sand. Gaara, having seen the ice blade lengthen and then come at him, quickly moved his sand out of the way. But then Daiku smirked again. The ice blade suddenly melted into a string of water, twisting through the air, managing to catch Gaara in surprise before freezing into sharp ice again and cutting Gaara's sand platform in half. Toppling over from his now one foot square sand platform, Gaara's used the remaining sand from the sand armour that he always wears to form a second sand platform, barely managing to escape a second swipe from Daiku's strange ice/water blade that can change its temperature and density.

Glaring grimly at Daiku, Gaara decided not to prolong this battle any longer. Gaara lifting both his hands up to the sky as if in an offer to the gods, he summoned forth a large amount of sand to burst forth from beneath Daiku's feet (21). Daiku just gapped at the mountain of sand about to crush him. Reacting with instinct, Daiku quickly performed another set of handseals and pumped all of his remaining chakra into this one last technique. "Hyouten: Hyorouro no Jutsu! (Ice Element: Ice Wall technique!)" Ice emerged from no where and encased Daiku in a protective sphere just seconds before it was swamped by waves upon waves of sand.

Gaara waited a full minute of silence and suspense before he drifted down onto the sand covered ground. With a wave of his hands, the sand automatically moved and uncovered what was buried beneath – a perfect ice sphere was revealed with an unconscious Daiku inside. As such, the match was finalised with Gaara as the winner, considering Daiku was no longer able to battle.

Hearing an explosion go off in the distance, Itachi sighed a little, knowing instinctively that his partner had somehow managed to screw something up again. "Looks like our meeting will have to come to an end, Ruri-sama. I will see again." And with those words, Itachi disappeared into a swirl of leaves.

Ruri gave an absent minded nod before she too burst into smoke, having dispelled herself and transferring the memories of the encounter back to the original Ruri still sitting comfortably at the VIP platform.

xxx XXX xxx **(Match 6)**

xxx XXX xxx **(Yuse Samure Vs Sasyaki Kageru)**

Samure had come out of his previous fight relatively unharmed but Kageru had suffered some second or third degree burns on her body. However, like always, her face remained impassive, even though the bandages underneath her new shirt were obvious signs of her injuries and pain. "Hajime!" The instant Kaga called the fight, Samure jumped backwards and started preparations.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Samure called forth 5 clones, and quickly tossed them each a small scroll numbered 1 through to 5. He then pulled out another scroll and threw it into the air. "Kai!" He dispelled the seal holding the item within the thrown scroll and it suddenly had a huge amount of water gushing out of it like an explosion. Flipping through another set of hand seals, Samure called his next technique: "Kirigakure no Jutsu!" The mist rolled in quickly and covered the entire arena from view of the audience.

"Fuuton: Daitoppa!" Kageru dispelled the mist with very little effort, but by that time, Samure's preparations had already been complete. Kageru found herself surrounded on five even sides by each of the Samure clones and there were all opening the scroll they held in their hands on the ground. Acting quickly, Kageru threw each clone a kunai that dispelled them but it wasn't soon enough to stop them from opening the scrolls.

"Too late! Goten Fuiin Heki (5 Point Sealing Barrier) (22) Activate!" Samure excitedly called out. Each scroll revealed one part of a larger seal, lines of sealing language traversed across the earth to the next scroll, connecting with the seals there and then continued on to the next. Within seconds, a large five star sealing matrix was formed

between the five seals, with Kageru trapped in the middle. Samure followed this up by slamming his hands on the ground and pumped even more chakra into his new technique and then the words on the seals suddenly changed colour from its normal blue to a violent red.

Kageru frowned but prepared herself for whatever may come, And come it did. From the ground before her rose a form made of earth, the collection of soil and mud suddenly remodelled itself until an exact replica of herself stood in front of Kageru. The viewing audience gapped at the two Kunoichis, one looking exactly like the other. However, Samure's clone of Kageru did not have the real Kageru's injuries, hence the only way to tell the difference between the two.

The real Kageru was not amused by the clone taking her form at all, and did not waste any time when she used shunshin in order to appear behind the clone and stabbed it in the back with a kunai. Expecting the clone to just burst into smoke, Kageru was surprised that the female look-a-like did none of that, instead it stepped forward pulling away from the kunai, twisted and did a round house kick to Kageru's face, knocking the Sound Kunoichi away with a bruised jaw.

"It's not an ordinary clone as you must have realised." Samure decided to explain while he smirked at Kageru's slightly confused face. She was really starting to show some emotions, even though they come up at the oddest of times. "As long as you are trapped inside my barrier, that clone of yourself will continue to exist and will fight you using your own techniques and abilities without any conscious effort on my part. Nothing can destroy her. This technique obviously makes you your own enemy."

Though impressed with the boy's technique, Kageru was too busy dodging several dangerously snake-like attacks from her copycat to respond. She was fully occupied with staying alive and unable to leave even a small percentage of her mind to linger on what she could do to escape her current predicament. She was literally fighting herself, how could she possibly win, when her clone fights

exactly like her and knows all her abilities. Unfortunately for Kageru, that was the moment she was interrupted by an outside emotion – Fear. / *Damn it.* / Kageru uncharacteristically swore in her mind as she swerved wildly to avoid a Senai Jyashu attack released by her copycat. The strange bouts of emotion that were transferred into her psyche from Yakushi Suzumi always came at the most inopportune times. It took Kageru all of two weeks to figure out (with help from Suzumi) what each of these strange and uncomfortable feelings meant and how to go about to suppress them somewhat. Fear especially was an emotion Kageru despised with all her being, and she was becoming all too well acquainted with anger and hate – two emotions she had always known of while growing up with but never recognised.

Suddenly, another bout of emotion rushed through her system, this time – it was determination, and a daring recklessness encouraging her to do whatever it takes to win. / *Suzumi must have calmed down enough to cheer for me.* / Kageru thought to herself once more as she refocussed her mind. / *Now, supposedly this is an exact copy of myself. So what are the differences? There must be some.* / It didn't take Kageru long to figure that out at all. While Kageru herself have been frequently bombarded with emotions emitting through her link with Yakushi Suzumi, her clone's expression never changed, as it does not have such an emotional tie with another. Not to mention, each time Kageru managed to cause damage to her clone, the copycat did not flinch or show any sign of pain. / *I have emotions now. But this clone doesn't. What was it that Suzumi once said? 'Emotions can also be a strength if used properly. Some people become incredibly strong when they are desperately trying to protect something close to them.'* Those were her words. / Kageru pondered slightly, jumping backwards from the release of sound waves from her clone.

/ *Do I have something precious to protect?* / Kageru asked herself honestly, a few memories swept into her mind.

One was Suzumi holding out her hand as a sign of trust – " *I'm trusting you with my heart; will you trust me with yours ?*"

Another memory of her creator, one of the scientists in the lab – " *Your name will be Sasayaki Kageru, that's my daughter's name. She would have been your age had she survived.* "

And a third memory came into her mind, regarding what one of the 'others' told her before he was destroyed with the rest – " *We are expendable, replaceable objects by the master's whim. But... is it bad of me... to want to live? Is it wrong of me... to want to continue to exist? You will be the last, our legacy. You will carry our memories. Live, survive and be a testament to our existence.* "

/ I will not die. I will not fail. For I am... the only one left... the only one to carry on their heritage. I will not... I refuse... / Yet another surge of determination and hope flooded Kageru's system from her connection with Suzumi and she suddenly found the strength to go beyond what she had always thought was her limit. "Just DIE!" Kageru cried with passion, so full of emotion, as she slammed her fist into her clones face, resulting in her copycat flying away from her for some great distance. Focussing chakra into her hands once more, Kageru slammed her tight fist into the ground. "Senai Jyashu Rakurai (Shadow Snake Hands Thunderbolt)! (23)" The shadow snakes emerged from Kageru's sleeves and burrowed underground to directly attack the five corners of the seal where the scrolls were located. Having encountered a smaller, weaker barrier protecting the scrolls itself, Kageru released the lightning charges that she had condensed within her summoned snake's mouths. As a result, five simultaneous explosions erupted from each side of the sealing barrier when each of the scrolls was electrocuted to the point of burning. This then disrupted Samure's seal, immediately dispelling the Kageru-clone and releasing the real Kageru from captivity.

Not wasting any more time, Kageru rushed towards Saumure. The Snow Nin was slow to react as he had just had his concentration snapped by the disruption to his seal and not to mention the large amount of chakra he had invested in the seal in the first place.

Suffice to say, it only took Kageru a punch to the jaw, a sweep of her legs to knock Samure off his feet and an elbow to the boy's vulnerable stomach in order to knock the Snow Ninja out of commission, and declare Kageru the winner of the match.

In the medical centre located on the east side of the Bai Ling stadium, Juro's dull eyes watched Echiko's pale form take in each and every breath. The Dokudes healers had told him that she would survive. But without one arm, Echiko's ninja career was effectively over. And that one knowledge coupled with the shock, blood loss, and witnessing of her brother's death, completely overwhelmed the already devastated Echiko. At 1:30 pm in the afternoon today, Harate Echiko fell into a deep coma.

And although the doctors all say she would survive and may one day recover physically, there was no telling when or even if she would ever wake up again. And as for his other teammate, Harate Eiji was declared dead upon arrival to the medical centre, there was nothing the doctors could do to help.

Having pleaded and begged with the Dokudes healers regarding whether or not there was anything else they could do to help his female teammate, they answered that although they could synthetically grow a new arm for her, but by the time the arm is ready for transplant, her body would have already healed, and would reject the new appendage anyway. So it was a lost cause from the very beginning.

/ It's all my fault. If I had been stronger, they wouldn't have been killed. If I had been stronger, I would of protected them somehow. If I had been stronger, I would have defended them and killed that bad guy (24). If I wasn't so pathetic, they wouldn't have had to protect me all this time. If I wasn't so weak, they wouldn't need to sacrifice themselves for pathetic little me. This is ALL MY FAULT! / Juro bit his lips hard enough to draw blood, eyes shut tightly to stop the tears for he knew that once he starts crying, he may not be able to stop.

/ If I hadn't of frozen due to the blood, I might have been able to help. IF had I just listened to grandfather when he gave me those lessons on swordsmanship, I might have been able to help somehow. If I had just taken my training seriously, I might not have been such a burden to my friends. Friends who died for me, who suffered pain for me, who would kill for me. Me, pathetic little ME! / The self-reproach continued to grow stronger, gaining momentum and drove the hard truth directly into Juro's heart.

/ I killed them. If it wasn't for me, Eiji wouldn't be dead and Echiko wouldn't have lost her arm and dreams of becoming a great Kunoichi. I literally caused the destruction of my team just because they cared for me... / Juro took a deep breath and wiped away any stray tears that fell from his stinging eyes.

/ No more. / He thought to himself finally. / No more will I be the pathetic, weak little being that I am. I will train, I will be strong. And I swear that next time, next time I will be the one to protect Echiko and the rest of my friends and family. Even if Echiko never wakes up, or if she hated me when she does wake up, I will still protect her. I owe it to her and to Eiji for all the years of looking after me that they did. I swear on the blood of my friends, on my very soul that I will become strong! I swear I will take vengeance on one Hoshigaki Kisame! /

xxx XXX xxx **(Match 7)**

xxx XXX xxx **(Sabaku no Gaara Vs Sasayaki Kageru)**

The final match was between Gaara (who was relatively unhurt even if he had used up close to 40 percent of his body's chakra), and Sasayaki Kageru (who still had a high percentage of her body's chakra, but she was also the more injured of the two). Gaara gave Kageru a firm glare. "We will not hold back." He told her, and she acknowledged with a nod of her own.

"Hajime!"

Kageru jumped back to avoid one of Gaara's sand arms and called for her trusty snake summons once more. "Senai Jyashu."

Unfortunately for Kageru, her snakes didn't even reach half way across the distance towards Gaara before they were captured by Gaara's sand and crushed into oblivion. Dropping the technique, Kageru had to make a bit of a mad dash to avoid several Gaara's sand arms trying to catch her in a Sabaku Kyuu. Unable to duck pass one of the sand arms, Kageru used her arm band and released a surge of high pitch sound vibrations that burst through the sand arm in a sonic boom affect. Thinking of using her sound for attacking purposes, Kageru then went on the offensive, firing blast after blast of condensed sound waves towards Gaara from her metallic arm band, all of which were stopped by Gaara's sand protecting him.

"Suna Shuriken." From the mass of sand protecting Gaara burst several dozen shurikens all flying through the air towards Kageru. Switching her volume to high, Kageru released a sound barrier all around her to protect herself from all projectile objects. Unfortunately for Kageru, with her attentions focused on dispersing the Suna shurikens, she didn't notice Gaara's trap until almost too late. Kageru stumbled a bit on her feet and looked down only to find herself slowly being swallowed into the sand. Slapping her arm (metallic sound amplifier and all) into the quick sand, Kageru quickly released a pulse of sound in order to free herself from the trap. Regrettably, this action took too long, allowing Gaara to finally capture Kageru in his famous Sabaku Kyuu (Desert Coffin).

"Surrender or die." Gaara's calm voice between no emotions and Kageru was just about to reply back with her own impassive words, having remembered being stuck in this same situation only a month ago when a sudden flash of emotion rushed through the emotional link into her body. Fear, pride and hope flooded her system, leaving Kageru unable to do much but follow what her emotions (which weren't even hers) told her to do.

"I forfeit this match, I am unable to defeat you, Gaara of the sand." And so ends the final match of the Kuunoki Chuunin Selection

Exams.

With the end of the matches, Ruri stood proudly once more in front of the various guests and audience. "Ladies and Gentlemen. I will now announce the winner of Chuunin Selection Examination – Sabaku no Gaara!"

The entire audience erupted into cheers and started a standing ovation for the once hated Jinchuriki. Gaara was stunned at the praise, cheers, screams and whistles literally raining upon his body. He stiffly nodded in acknowledgement at Ruri's words and accepted Kaga's hand shake of congratulations. Overall, he was still in shock even several hours after the event. For once in a very long time, he felt wanted and appreciated.

Naruto glanced back at the stadium in the distant. Even as he stood miles away from the tournament, he could still hear the wild cheers from here. Naruto smiled as he imagined Gaara's stunned face, but the smile quickly faded as he remembered the fate of 3 other genins who had the unfortunate fate of meeting up with a member of the Akatsuki.

His shoulders immediately slumped at the realisation that one of the young genins were dead, another in a coma and the last would suffer bouts of depression, anger and uncontrolled hate for years to come. All for the sake of keeping his escape unnoticed by anyone of the Akatsuki.

Willing the tears that stung his eyes away, Naruto took a deep breath and started his steps once more, heading in the north-eastern direction, towards the island that Hikon had described to him just this morning.

/ The only way to avoid Zetsu's eyes is to find a place that does not have any plant habitation. That leaves only the desert or an iceberg.
/ He thought to himself, trying desperately to not think about the fates

of Juro, Eiji and Echiko. / I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Because of me, you were all hurt. For me, you suffer. I swear that one day. One day, I will make it up to you all. /

Finally, with everything going smoothly to plan and all the guests moved to the celebration chamber, Ruri slumped her shoulders down in exhaustion fighting back tears, having suffered quite some stress at meeting Itachi, worrying about Naruto's escape and feeling guilty for the lost of young lives. "And so ends this chapter, and begins the next." She signed heavily. "I think I'm getting too old for this."

Kaga chose that moment to drop by, walking into the VIP platform from the doorway and overhearing her strange words. "What do you mean, Ruri-sama? What has ended?" Kaga asked in total confusion to what his mistress was talking about.

"And so ends the 'Restoration of Faith', but this is only the beginning of the 'Trials of Faith'". Ruri's enigmatic words did not help dissolve any of Kaga's confusion.

(Complete.)

(1) For more information as to what the hell I'm talking about, please go to Waisa Bado's character profile page to read up on it. Links are on my profile's page.

(2) Be patient and you'll find out in the next arc – Trials of Faith.

(3) Here's another hint as to what I'm planning to do.

(4) He's talking about the time directly after Elle's (his first friends) death.

(5) Not so much like Iroh and Zuko from Avatar the last Air Bender , but something similar in relationship

(6) No reference, I just made this up. I don't know, for some odd reason, Ino just strikes me as a lightning type.

(7) I made up the 6 elements thing. I know that Kakashi spoke of 5 in the Manga series, but I always wondered why the founder of jutsus and ninja society was called the "Sage of the six paths". If, let's assume, each path is represent by an element, then there should be 6 elements all together, not just five; hence why I made this up. Hope this doesn't confuse you all too much; I just like having something up my sleeve for later.

(8) Copied from Avatar: the Last Airbender . Information found from an Avatar fansite – Distant Horizons ([www . musogato . com / avatar / index2 . html](http://www.musogato.com/avatar/index2.html))

(9) Copied from Avatar: the Last Airbender . Information found from an Avatar fansite – Distant Horizons ([www . musogato . com / avatar / index2 . html](http://www.musogato.com/avatar/index2.html))

(10) Idea for Shino using the bugs as an extension of his body (wings, claws, etc) were inspired/copied from another Naruto Fanfiction – Lost Souls by LD1449. Please give all credit to the original author of Lost Souls .

(11) Just a hit of what and how much chakra was sealed away when Ruri used the Tenkun no Buki – Gojyo Fuiin wa on Gaara in Chapter 33 of Restoration of Faith .

(12) Just continue reading on, and you'll know what I'm hinting at. There will be character death!

(13) The bad guy from the first Naruto Movie. You remember, right? Princess Koyuki's bastard of an uncle, yeah him!

(14) I'm basing the stadium design on modern stadium designs, namely that of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium in Washington D.C. I've got a picture of it (in small scale) at my

website. Truthfully, I just googled for the word 'stadium' and this one matches my idea of a stadium the most.

(15) Literally step by step translation of the 'affect' of the technique. You create an ice circle with your opponent either standing inside or flying in mid air, within the width of the circle, and then you just freeze the entire column into ice, depending on how much water you have to use this technique. It's an instant trap for your opponent and there is no escape. This attack is copied from Bleach , whereby the character Kuchiki Rukia uses her sword "Sodeno Shiroyuki" to draw a circle and ice basically encases anything within that circle, and destroys it.

(16) Remember this technique? It's a Genjutsu that first appeared in Faith in Humanity, used by Sakura.

(17) Remember earlier in Restoration of Faith , how I hinted at some sort of disagreement between Kisame and the current Mizukage – of whom I made as one of the original members of the 7 Swordsmen's of the Mist. Basically, we know that there are 7 of them, 1 of which is Zabuza; another is that weird dude in the Cannon anime series that had the twin swords and can create lightning. The third is Kisame, whom I made to have a good friendship with a made-up original character – "Shinji" (also one of the 7 swordsman and is Mishizu's late uncle). "Shinji" died, and the rest of the group became corrupted and disbursed due to differing ideologies. Another of the 7 becomes Mizukage, and his friend (another made up character "Kapasu Genjiro" – Juro's grandfather) stayed with him as a lapdog. Obviously, Kisame is hateful of both the Mizukage (former member of the 7) as well as "Genjiro", hence the drama. Hope I'm not confusing you all.

(18) I'm referring to those things that Rain Ninjas always have over the face and mouths. It's a device that enables them to breathe underwater. As Mist Shinobi, I'm assuming that Eiji and his teammates all have one of those, just in case they must battle within water.

(19) These are the same Ukiyo-e caricature pictures I've got uploaded onto my website. Go there and have a look yourself.

(20) Remember how I mentioned along time ago that using the Yochigan for prolonged periods of time will destroy your eyesight? Well, here's the proof.

(21) Just like how Gaara called forth that mountain of sand when he was battling Deidara in the Naruto Shippuden cannon episodes.

(22) Original jutsu. This technique is a (made-up) precursor to the "Gofuu kekai" Akatsuki used to protect their lair, when the 2 Konoha teams tried to save Gaara from having the Shukaku extracted out of him. The theory is the same pretty much. There are 5 points in which create the edges of the barrier. The field itself creates a copy of the person trapped in side, and as long as the barrier is up (depending on the continuos stream of chakra being fed into it by Samure) then the people trapped itself are forever forced to fight themselves until they die.

(23) Another original jutsu. It's basically Senai Jyashu with electrical currents travelling down its bodies.

(24) Juro's a bit naïve thinking that he could take on Kisame. But then again, he's not exactly stable or sane at the moment, hence why he thinks this way.

Merry Christmas everyone and have a happy new year!

I'm taking a break from writing after the first chapter of Trials, so expect some delays.

Last but not least, please read and review. Tell me what you think. I know this chapter was rushed but it was the best I could do. I really wanted it out before Christmas.

Thank you all for all your support. Now, the 2nd part of the Faith Series is officially finished. I hope you've enjoyed reading the story

so far. See ya.

TRIALS OF FAITH IS NOW OFFICIALLY UPLOADED.